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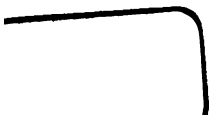
HE COMETH NOT  
SHE SAID.

BY  
ANNIE THOMAS.





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**“‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”**



# “‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

BY

ANNIE THOMAS

(MRS. PENDER CUCLIP),

AUTHOR OF “DENIS DONNE,” “PLAYED OUT,” “DOWER HOUSE,”  
“A PASSION IN TATTERS,” &C. &C.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON :  
CHAPMAN & HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.  
1873.

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249. 9. 357.



LONDON:  
BRADBURY, AGNEW, & CO., PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

# CONTENTS.

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## CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
"HAVE I DONE WELL, OR ILL ? . . . . .	1

## CHAPTER II.

DESPAIR ! . . . . .	27
---------------------	----

## CHAPTER III.

A FALSE STEP . . . . .	48
------------------------	----

## CHAPTER IV.

FARTHER ASTRAY . . . . .	69
--------------------------	----

## CHAPTER V.

LOST AND FOUND . . . . .	90
--------------------------	----

## CHAPTER VI.

"BIRD OR DEVIL !" . . . . .	114
-----------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER VII.

AS GOLD IS TRIED BY FIRE . . . . .	137
------------------------------------	-----

CONTENTS

CHAPTER VIII	24
THE LAST	1
CHAPTER IX	1
THE BRUNETTE	1
CHAPTER X	2
THE BRUNETTE	2
CHAPTER XI	2
THE BRUNETTE	2
CHAPTER XII	2
THE BRUNETTE	2
CHAPTER XIII	2
THE BRUNETTE	2

“‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

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## CHAPTER I.

“HAVE I DONE WELL, OR ILL?”

MADGE RODEN is as self-possessed as it is desirable that any girl of twenty should be. She has played the part of young lady of the land, Queen of Halsworthy, and idol of the neighbourhood too long for any feeble embarrassing doubts as to her relative importance to come forward and cripple her on ordinary occasions. But this does not seem to her an ordinary occasion—this first rather romantic meeting with the real Simon Pure.

Here before her is the man about whom she has heard from her childhood as a hero, the man for whom she had almost unconsciously designed herself, and for whom she is very sure Mrs. Henderson had designed her ; and he is the cousin of her future husband, and she ought to give him a welcome, and let him understand their future relationship at once.

"But perhaps I ought to leave it to Grif," she thinks. "Grif may imagine that I fancy he doesn't understand etiquette, if I put myself forward before he has thought it necessary to introduce this waif and stray to me." So she marches on with her pretty, easy step by Grif's side, and Philip Fletcher is left in ignorance of her name, for Grif forgets his part of master of these ceremonies.

"I'm going on to a place called Halsworthy," Philip explains, as he swings out

with as free and light a step as if he hadn't already walked twenty-five miles this day—"going to look up an old friend of my mother's; do you know her—Mrs. Henderson."

"She's in my house at the present moment," Griffiths exclaims delightedly. And then Philip, or Phil, as he is invariably called, leans forward and says,—

"Then I am sure this is Miss Roden," and crosses over and takes the girl's hand and adds,—

"Philip and I are like brothers: you must forgive me for telling you abruptly how glad I shall be to have you for a sister."

She takes in all the points of resemblance and all the points of difference between her Philip and this one at a glance. They have the same level brows, the same steady glance, the same easy, careless way. But her Philip

is indisputably the handsomer of the two—handsomer and half an inch taller.


They each hear a great deal and tell a great deal to one another, as they walk back from the old English garden to the house. Phil, for instance, hears that Halsworthy is so many miles from Parkavon, and is told that, being so many, he had better make up his mind to be driven on by Miss Roden, rather than walk there. And Madge hears several little incidents of his pedestrian tour down into this country briskly narrated, for Phil has the great merit of being lucid and brief—his narrations last about a minute and a half. His hearers are not compelled to distort their facial muscles in order to portray a feeling of interest which is quite dead. He is terse, picturesque, graphic. In short, he is amusing without attempting to be facetious.

And Madge finds him amusing, and

Madge likes him for being so ; and Madge in all her life never concealed a liking. " Oh ! the pity of it that he didn't come before ! " Mrs. Henderson's prophetic heart almost palpitates the words as he goes in, and makes himself known to her, and she feels that there is about him all the radiance of reality.

So like, and so unlike ! At every turn they are reminded by him of that cousin of his, who has wooed and won, and gone away so easily and carelessly, and deceitfully. They can't help it. Mrs. Henderson and Madge catch themselves looking at one another, and interrogating one another mutely, as some of the absent Philip's very tones fall on their ears with a truer ring than " his can ever have," they feel in silence and in sorrow.

The young pedestrian tourist is too tired to care to engage in the croquet match





which Griffiths presently organises ; and so he is left with Mrs. Henderson, while the seven girls and Grif play that game, which is the strong point and sole remaining hope of the Misses Wainwright.

For they play it well—very well indeed ; driving interloping balls away into space, and helping those who can reward them for their help with the most consummate ease and skill. But, for all their ease and skill and amiability (displayed towards himself alone), Grif can't help wishing that they would let him get a word with Madge sometimes, outside the reach of their keen ears.


To tell the truth, Madge is not very keen about croquet this day. She would far rather hear what this stranger, who is still no stranger, is saying to Mrs. Henderson. Finally inclination gets the better of her, and she begs a left-out Miss Wainwright to take

her mallet and place, and asks Grif to order her pony carriage.

“You’re going away very early,” Griffiths says discontentedly ; and somehow he associates this new-comer with Madge’s impatience to be gone, and hates the name of “Philip Fletcher” even more than he hated it when the other man who bore it was present. But, in spite of his discontent, he contrives to free himself presently from the trammels of croquet, and comes and stands close by Madge, to the trembling wrath of the Miss Wainwrights.

Madge is in such a thoughtful mood that she looks almost sad. She has been following many sudden springs of thought that have gushed up in her mind this day to their sources, and the result of her investigation is a stinging distrust of novelty and appearances.

“Grif,” she begins gravely, not looking at



the man she is addressing, but letting her eyes fasten themselves on a distant object that does not call for any attention from her —“Grif, you have known your cousins a long time, haven’t you?”


“All their lives, I think,” he answers indifferently. He has no manner of feeling for or interest in his cousins, beyond the one of their being his blood-relations. He has no special liking, no faint admiration, for any one of them. On the contrary, now that he sees them near Madge, he marks all their inelegancies of feature, and figure, and manner with a perspicuity that would send the Miss Wainwrights’ hearts down to dismal depths did they but know it. Happily for their current peace of mind, they don’t know it. So they posture, and pose, and propel their balls about with a pleasant feeling of playing well, and impressing Grif with the fact.

"You will marry one of them by-and-by," Madge says prophetically; and now she transfixes Griffiths with a glance, "and you will be so right, Grif."

"Marry one of them?—good Lord! no,—not even if I had never known—I mean, if I had never seen anyone else," Grif replies hurriedly.

"My dear Grif, what nonsense!" Madge says tolerantly, with that immense air of superior knowledge and experience which is one of Madge's special attributes. "You think you won't now, I quite believe that; but I know how these things end generally, and I say you'll marry one of your cousins by-and-by, and you'll be so right."

In spite of his being some years older than Madge, in spite of his firm belief in her engagement with Philip Fletcher being her solitary love-affair, Grif has an unaccountable



feeling of youth and inexperience steal over him as he listens to this girl. But he casts one look at the group on the croquet ground, and that look strengthens him in the position he had taken at first.

"They're good sort of girls enough," he says; "but when it comes to marrying them, that's a different thing."

"Of course not 'them,' but *one* of them, Grif; you'll single out one in time, and then she'll seem so different to her sisters that you will wonder you hadn't seen her superiority to the rest all along; and then all your long knowledge of her will make you love her more, and you'll feel so happy and so safe."

He knows now, the sympathetic generous tender fellow, that she is contrasting her positive case with his possible one. She has no long knowledge of her lover to fall back upon and make her love him more, now

that he is away, trying her by his unnecessary absence.

"Well," he says, trying to think away the tears that will come into his eyes at the thought of Madge's distress, "we needn't talk about my marriage yet—not for many a long day. I'd rather not talk about it at all to you now," he can't help adding in a mutter.

"I don't suppose people ever are quite happy, whether they get what they want, or whether they lose it," Madge answers, following her spring of thought well home to its source, in firm reliance on Grif not taking the smallest advantage of her daring spirit of exploration. And Grif justifies her reliance, for he only shakes his head and says,—

"Perhaps you're right ; all the same, I'm sorry I lost what I wanted."

Madge is not a coquette by design, she has no greed for miscellaneous love and admiration,

12      “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

but she does like to keep alive what she feels to be the firm, true, and good interest which Grif has in her, and she in him. And so when she is saying good-by to him this day, she uses the very words that a practised coquette would use.

“ As soon as you’ve settled on the one, Grif, let me know, that I may endorse your choice if I can. I shall be frightfully jealous and exacting for you.”

He can’t answer her in the half-real, half-bantering tone she has taken up. He can only gulp down a big ball of hopelessly passionate emotion. Why will she?—how can she like him so much and not love him a little? So he says nothing aloud, calls her his ‘darling’ in his heart, and as Madge drives away with her friends, he goes back to his cousins.

In spite of himself, Madge’s words make

him regard them in a new light. In spite of himself, he scans them all curiously in search of the possibility of one being a trifle superior to the others. And all hopes of finding that which he is searching for flees from him, as they chorus out some of their convictions respecting Madge.

"I wonder, with all that money, that Miss Roden hasn't married before, Grif."

"Why, she's young enough in all conscience," he says testily.

"*Is* she—young? dear me! young for an heiress I suppose you mean. Seven or eight and twenty?—well, of course that's not old."

"Seven or eight and twenty!—she's not twenty-one yet: she's only waiting till she's of age to marry."

"Poor thing! how terrible for her to have gone off so then, if she *is* so young as that."



14      “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

“Gone off! why she gets prettier and prettier every day,” Grif says indignantly.

“Oh! Grif, really we shall think, I don’t know what—all sorts of things, if you pretend to see beauty in Miss Roden. No, no” (with a great air of magnanimity), “she’s a nice amiable girl, unaffected and simple, and evidently desirous of pleasing; but pretty! no, no!”

“Fine feathers make fine birds,” another Miss Wainwright remarks, with a vicious recollection of how becoming Madge’s dress had been to her.

“No one can deny that her feathers were fine enough,” a third strikes in; “rather over dressed, wasn’t she, mamma? Costly things on a girl like that can’t be called good taste even by her most infatuated friends.”

“It was amusing to see how eager she was to relinquish you, Grif, and to get hold of

Mr. Fletcher," another Miss Wainwright cries, laughing a great deal too long and loud for the laughter to be genuine. "She was all eyes and ears for you at luncheon ; and you see when he came she couldn't play croquet like the rest of us, but must go and stand near him and try to attract his attention. I suppose she thinks she may be as bold as she pleases : she can afford to make herself conspicuous."

"She never tried to attract any man's attention in her life," Grif says hotly ; "she has enough of it without trying."

"Now, Grif, don't be angry, but just wait and see if I am not right. While her lover is away, she will get up a flirtation with his cousin ; she was pretending to take such interest in everything he said, it was sickening."

And it is one of these women who say

such things of her that Madge prophesies he will marry by-and-by.

\*           \*           \*           \*

During the drive home Madge is restlessly vivacious. She describes the Miss Wainwrights to Phil ; she mimics them ; she laughs at them ; she pulls herself up suddenly in frowning impatience at the thought of the very event she has suggested as possible to Griffiths. And Mrs. Henderson, watching her with loving, anxious eyes, feels that the mirth and the mimicry are both false, and that Madge, her darling, is in the agony of a perplexity with which no outsider may dare to meddle.

Their conversation is cramped after all, directly she leaves off her mockery of the Miss Wainwrights. In the common order of things, Philip, the absent, ought to be, and would be, the topic. But it is treading

on treacherous ground to speak of him to the man he personated while it served his purpose. Both Madge and Mrs. Henderson have a strong feeling upon them, now that they see him, of having defrauded this late-comer.

Moreover, Madge is rapidly becoming too angry with Philip for having gone in the way he has, and stayed in the way he has, to speak of him without a certain tremulous tone of voice that she is very much ashamed of. And in the midst of her refraining from all mention of him, she feels that it is due to herself not to shrink from the topic—due to Mrs. Henderson to let his cousin know as soon as possible that there has been no connivance on her dear old friend's part—due to Philip, her lover, to mention him without fear, and to show that she dreads no reproach concerning him.

And she cannot do it.

Failing heart, and failing faith ! How she tries to prop up both ; how she tries to flatter herself back into blind belief ; how she shrinks from a gleam of further light ; how she regrets that the one who was meant to be the " real " Prince from the first has come, and that he is so little disappointing. How she blames herself for all these feelings.

There is intense relief to her in getting home this day—intense relief in getting back to the old home where no harm has ever befallen her, and where she has never been more nor less than she is now, to all the loyal, faithful hearts who dwell there. A sense of relief and safety creeps over her, as she flings the reins down, and jumps out, and then remembers that she is mistress here, and says, quite freely and cordially,—

"You must come and dine with us to-day,

that you and my aunt may know each other, without delay, Mr. Fletcher. There is nothing out of the way in my asking him the first day I see him, is there?" she appeals to Mrs. Henderson; "for we are to be cousins, you know."

She feels that this is a superfluous reminder, as soon as she has uttered it; and so she tries to look and act as if she didn't, and is un-Madge-like altogether. Explanations, elaborations, all are foreign to Madge's nature.

"Why on earth should she try to speak of this subject before him?" Mrs. Henderson thinks, as they go to the room where Miss Roden senior awaits them.

Madge has got herself together in her progress from the hall door to the oak-wainscoted room, that still retained its ancient designation of "parlour" at Moorbridge.

She is quite the Madge her friends all love to see her, as she goes gracefully and gaily forward to her old relative, saying, as she goes,—

“Philip’s cousin is here, aunt—another Philip Fletcher ; you must welcome him, for Philip’s sake and mine, until you know him better.”

“Another ” Philip Fletcher is rather discomposing to Miss Roden, but she makes the best of the social jungle into which they have all rambled, and proceeds at once to talk polite conversation with immense old-lady power.

“ You are just fresh from London, and the country must look very beautiful to you,” she says, as if the country were all her own doing, and she did like to hear a word, in acknowledgment of its superiority to everything else on earth, uttered at times.

“ Yes, very beautiful,” he says, looking at

Madge, and thinking of Madge, and utterly failing to grasp the entire meaning of old Miss Roden's words, “very beautiful, but——”

“——but not for me,” is what would be the conclusion of his sentence, if old Miss Roden, in her ardent desire to confute what she considers a compromising mention of the natural beauties of Halsworthy, didn't interrupt him.

“But—now you're not going to tell me that you think it too cramped and low? I won't hear it. See the expanse—the bold sweep above it?”

For a wild moment, Philip Fletcher thinks that Miss Roden is speaking of Madge's brow, and Madge's glorious arching head. Then he collects his faculties, knows that he is misunderstanding her, and making an idiot of himself, and answers,—



"Do believe me, I think all I see perfection. I never dreamed of such an earthly paradise as this in which I find myself."

"And you will find yourself in it very often, I hope, by-and-by, when your cousin is master here," Madge says, gallantly, though the corners of her mouth twitch painfully as she speaks. And then she leaves him, with that last speech of hers ringing in his ears, while she goes to dress for dinner.

Madge Roden is no coquette. She does not desire to deck her beauty in this stranger's eyes, for the sake of making them smart with an admiration which they should not express. Nevertheless, the taste of the woman will have it so. She puts on a white dress, and then tries ribbons of various colours against her cheeks and hair, to see which suits her best. And, at last, she doffs the white dress, and dons a cream-tinted one, with

which some sweet wild-rose pink harmonises admirably.

And she puts her rich hair in cloudy ripples over her brow, and commands the sweet tremulous lines of her mouth to "be still," and tries hard to regulate the sparkling measure of her eyes. And when she has done all these things, she goes down, knowing that she is looking her best, and that her best is a very fair thing.

So they all dine together (for Mr. Henderson has been summoned by special messenger), and Madge is a suppressed young hostess, because she will put her dear old aunt so prominently forward. But, for all that suppression, she is quite enough of a queen to command attention from this one who looks upon her for the first time.

She sees that he is noticing the effect of each shade and each ribbon. She feels that

he appreciates her taste in setting forth such beauties as she has. And so when he comes near her in the course of the evening, and touches her dress, and says (letting the light fall on its semi-transparent texture),—

“Is this idealized silk, Miss Roden, or is it a thing that every-day women may buy and wear?”

“Yes, at six-and-eightpence a yard. And how exactly you are like my Philip; he raves about this colour,” she says, with a great big effort at being all she ought to be. And then she concentrates herself, and asks him the question she has been longing to ask ever since he came upon her unexpectedly in that revised old English garden.

“Have you seen much of him in town? He must have been so sorry that you came away just as he went back.”

She says it inquiringly, wistfully, deject-

edly, and he does not know how to answer her. He has been loving and loyal to his ne'er-do-well cousin all his life, but his love and loyalty are most sorely tried now. "Graceless as he is, how can he fritter away such an opportunity?" the true Philip questions. But no answer is accorded him, and he has to say something.

"I've been unlucky enough to miss him," he says, vaguely. "In town, you see, your time is not your own, and you're always missing the very people you want to meet. It's always a white-stone day to me, when I do meet Philip," he continues with energy; and Madge looks at him with a gaze that seems to penetrate into his soul.

The girl is a puzzle—a sublime puzzle to him. Is she acting? or mad? or only childish? Still, when she suddenly leans nearer to him, and asks,—

26      “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT, SHE SAID.’ ”

“ You can tell me !—have I done well  
or ill ? The truth now—the truth ! ”

He pauses. Shall he speak it ?

## CHAPTER II.

### DESPAIR !

“Love can hope when Reason would despair.”

ENGAGED to Madge ! owning his engagement ! Standing there before her, with that love-light in his eyes, affianced to another woman ! Olive tries to take in the truth, and cannot.

It is the very worst that has come upon her now, she tells herself, and her hands even seem numb with this pain that can't be combated, with this deadly assailant of her peace that can't be grappled with. There is something terribly piteous in the girl's utter inability to be other than fond of

28      “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

him still, though he has been so faithless to her.

He proceeds to explain, and extenuate—after the manner of men. And, after the manner of women, she listens and is lenient.

“I can’t tell how it came about,” he says. “It would all have been different, you know that, Olive,—if you hadn’t cast me adrift in the way you did ; and Madge——”

“Don’t say a word about Madge;” she shivers, and then she adds, in her fruitless, candid wrath,—

“I could trample on the throat of any other woman in the world who crossed my path. How you ought to love her !”

He is sitting on the bench still, his arm resting on a rustic, half-decayed table in front of it, his face bent down, and his soul sick with the conviction that he will always go on missing the best that the world can

give him. And she is standing about before him, wrapping her shawl around her and loosening it, resting now on one foot and now on the other, feeling it equally hard to be near him and to go away from him, greedily divining every expression of his face, and feeling them all so unsatisfying.

She recalls every lingering pressure of the hand, every love-lighted glance, every endearing epithet that he has lavished upon her lately, and she longs, she yearns, to be told that they were not all a cheat. This love that he has depicted with such deceiving skill—is it all a lie ?

“How could you do it ?” she gasps out ; and this is the only accusation she makes, but it pierces through his selfish coat of mail.

“If I could undo it, I would,” he stammers out earnestly. “But that would only be



perjuring myself to her, and doing no good with you. Forgive me, Olive ! ”

He rises up and goes to her as she flutters about in her misery on the gravel path, and holds his hands out, and bends his head down towards her in a deferentially loving way that makes her brain whizz and her heart beat ; and he is Madge’s Philip, she recollects, and, after this day, all interest in him must be crushed out of her heart.

But still, for all this saving recollection, she lets him take her hand and draw her to him, and a thrill of rapture relieves her anguish for a moment as he says,—

“ I love you, Olive—I’ve always loved you : believe that of me to the end.”

Her white, wistful face lifts itself up, and deep in her eyes he reads a portion of the passionately intense misery that he has inflicted upon her. This is love, he knows ;

such love as gracious, happy Madge will never lavish upon him ; such love as can only exist in the heart of a girl who has a strong element of recklessness in her nature.

He remembers well how he laboured strenuously at first, long ago, to make this girl care for him ; remembers how carefully he planted the love that looked so fair a flower, and that has turned out such a noxious weed to poor Olive, who nourished and cherished it. He remembers how he left her ; how he wooed her by every means in his power when accident threw them together again. And as he remembers all these things, he loves her as he knows he will never love another woman, be the other good, kind, and fair as an angel.

“ Olive,” he says, pressing her hands together in his own against his breast, “ my darling, I’ve been mad, I think,—mad to believe that I could exist without you, without

your love and kisses,—mad, to imagine that Madge Roden’s cool, complacent regard could ever compensate me for the loss of your thrilling words and tones. Let us be what we were before: be my wife, and, whatever comes of it, I shall be happier with you than without you.”

She shakes like a reed in his strong embrace; her brain can’t clearly entertain this idea which he has put before her as such a plain possibility, when only the minute before it had been such an utter impossibility. “His wife!” She whispers the words as he stoops and kisses her wildly, desperately. And then she understands everything as he ceases, and looks away from the face he has been gazing at with such rapture, and she sees he is pale and gloomy.

But still his hand caresses her silky hair; still her hands are palpitating in his grasp.

Can she give up all this ? can she renounce him at the call of either friendship or honour ?

She questions herself thus in a dreamy kind of way, and then suddenly she rouses herself and says—

“ And what of Madge ? ”

“ Oh ! I must break it off with her as decently as I can,” he says, almost savagely ; for he is beginning to repent himself already of that burst of passionate feeling which induced him to make Olive such an offer. He is beginning already to have visions of the many disagreeables that will beset his path, if Olive is “ foolish enough to take him at his word.”

She reads every thought that is in his mind, and, with a wrench that nearly tears out her heart-strings, she frees herself from his arms, and stands back out of his reach.

34      "‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID."

"Keep your engagement with Madge," she says quiveringly, for she is sorely shaken by this storm; "keep your engagement with Madge."

"Do you mean this, Olive?—do you reject me?"

"Reject you! Didn't I see the repentance in your face—the regret that you should have let yourself be led into saying it the minute after you asked me? Reject you! Don't I know that you'd hate me if I were weak enough to come between you and fortune? for it's Madge's fortune you love, Philip, not herself. Reject you! Oh! this is the worst of all, that you should have let me see what it cost you to offer me what you thought a reparation."

He expostulates, beseeches, explains; but the burden of his strain is that he is helpless. A man can't marry, and live on

nothing. No fellow is justified in dragging a girl down into poverty, however much he loves her. The gratification of passion at the expense of principle, in his case, would be as ruinous to her as to himself. All this in broken, pathetic tones, that accord terribly well with the deep, loving tenderness of his eyes.

She grows calmer presently, and struggles to separate from him with dignity.

“After all this—this cruel mockery,” she says, “we mustn’t meet again. There would be more pain to me in seeing you, and knowing that you felt you could dare to insult me by seeking me, than even *I* could bear. You have made my life a howling wilderness, indeed. But there is one person I pity more than I do myself, and that is the girl who is to be your wife.”

She stops, out of breath with her ve-

hence and her anger, and he admires this phase of Olive intensely. “What a spirit the girl has! If only she had a little money!”

“Madge is more to be pitied than you are,” he says, slowly. “She will never, in all her life, win such love from any man as you have won from me.”

“The better for her,” Olive says, sharply: “such love as yours is poison, and when once it gets into the veins, it never gets out again. It will taint all my life, Philip; but I’m glad I’ve had it.”

There is something glorious about the girl as she says this. Philip recognises something of the devotedness of her nature, and can’t help appealing once more to it.

“You’ll never hate me, will you, Olive?”

“Hate you! gracious, no,” she answers, impatiently. “Hate you! why I could be happy if I could hate you or get indifferent

to the sound of your name and the thought of you. What a comfort it would be to forget you !” she adds, abruptly. “What a comfort to marry some kind fellow, and forget you !”

He looks at her wonderingly ; is her mind going ? He half fears that it is, and a poignant pang of remorse is his portion for an instant. Then she relieves him of that dread by saying—

“Don’t think me distraught or dreadful at all, for saying that : most girls would have had the thought in their minds, and not have said it ; but I don’t think it worth while to have any further concealment from you. I can’t sink any lower in your estimation——”

“Olive !” he interrupts in real dismay.

“I mean it, I know it,” she goes on imperiously. “Didn’t you let me see—didn’t you show me as plainly as you ever showed



38      “‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

a fact to a fool in your life before—just now, that you felt wofully sad at the idea of my becoming your wife? I saw your rage at your own honourable weakness. I saw your dread of my taking advantage of it. I saw the depth to which I had fallen, and—I can’t clutch at the straw of a shadow of reticence any longer.”

“You have conjured up a wrong—created an insult,” he cries in real distress. “I asked you to be my wife, and you turn upon me and overwhelm me with an amount of self-abasement that’s ten times harder for me to witness than any scorn of myself would be; you held me in your hand, and flung me——”

“Where you directed me,” she bursts out. “It’s over and done with, and now this is ‘life’s farewell to the hope of a moment.’ Good-by, Philip; *try* never to let me look at your face again.”

She is holding out both hands, and he touches them and turns from her, bitter and broken in spirit, crushed and humbled, and sorely sick at heart.

And she stands there with the damp mists gathering about her, and the low moaning wind sounding in her ears, muttering "good-by, good-by," as long as she can see him.

"It was their last hour—a madness of farewells." There can be no more pain in this world for her, she tells herself as she slowly walks in. After this, nothing can hurt her ; after this, nothing can humiliate her ; after this, nothing can surprise her.

She shrinks with an altogether unaccountable shrinking from going in and facing Mrs. Tollington, for she hears that lady's chariot-wheels coming along the drive. Is it possible that cruelty has made her a coward ? No,

no ; Mrs. Tollington and every other atom of humanity will be powerless to distress her from this time forth.

So she tells herself in her ignorance.

The day is dark, dreary, and damp. It cannot be the bracing atmosphere, therefore, that has imparted this unwonted flush to Mrs. Tollington's fair face. That lady greets Olive with a keen, flashing glance, with a sharp, cutting inquiry.

“ May I ask, Miss Aveland, why you entertain gentlemen surreptitiously in my absence, with whom you appear to be on most distant terms in my presence ? ”

The fair delicate-looking woman has a power of spiteful fury about her in spite of her limp languor. Like a cross cat's, her eyes change from their normal hue of blue to sparkling, scintillating green as she interrogates Olive and waits for Olive's reply.

"Appearances are against her again," Olive feels with a qualm, and, as she feels it, she knows that there are other stabs that wound frightfully, besides those that are given in love's conflict.

She makes an effort—a supreme effort to be coherent and collected, and says,—

"Mr. Fletcher called on you, and, not finding you at home, he chose to come into your garden : it is not my place to turn your friends out."

"A false, paltry, pitiful evasion," Mrs. Tollington cries in shrill insulting tones that she would not venture to employ towards her cook or housemaid. "Maria saw what was going on from the window ; and I'm ashamed of you, Miss Aveland—ashamed that such deceit and depravity should exist in one whom my husband trusted so-o blindly."

Mrs. Tollington raises her voice, as she

says this, in a melodramatically hysterical way, and Olive knows that the servants are in the hall listening, giggling, delighting in her being called to account for what they will consider a sly and underhand interview with “her young man.” She knows it, and her shaken strength gives way as she realizes that through him she may be again cast out as she was from Mrs. Wilmot’s with a stain on her fair name. There is no pity in the vain, mocking, triumphant face opposite to her. Down goes her last barrier of defence, her self-possession, and she sobs out,—

“ Oh ! Phil, Phil, it is hard.”

“ Upon my word,” Mrs. Tollington flings out the words with vicious velocity, “ this is a little more than I can endure. If you are not engaged to Mr. Fletcher, you must please to leave my house at your earliest convenience. Nothing short of a positive recog-

nised engagement could make me sanction such extremely indelicate conduct."

"I will leave your house at once," Olive says, starting up.

"You are not engaged to him, then?" Mrs. Tollington cries, with an eager interest that she herself would have instantly denounced as criminal if exhibited by any other married woman.

"That I decline to tell you," poor Olive says, trying to speak coolly, and feeling in the midst of her misery a tiny thrill of satisfaction in baffling the curiosity of the insatiably vain creature who believes that, but for her Tollington, every man who comes near would instantly offer to lead her to the altar. And Mrs. Tollington makes up her mind that she will give that "exceedingly imprudent young man the benefit of the doubt, and extract the truth from him concerning

Olive at the earliest opportunity. A sweet sympathetic friend is such a safeguard to a young man," she tells herself. And she resolves to be that safeguard to him at their next meeting.

But, in the meantime, Olive (whom she involuntarily fears) must go.

A deary hour or two of packing up ensues, for Mrs. Tollington has said that she must go, and Olive has no desire to stay on sufferance. But the faithful, bruised heart is very despairing, as she reflects that, when she goes from this callous creature's house, she has no friend to whom she can turn for protection, comfort, refuge.

For she would rather lie down and die of her desolation at this juncture than go back to the good, loving, generous-hearted young mistress of Moorbridge House "who holds Philip in her toils."

There is abominable bitterness in Mrs. Tollington's last words to her.

"Until this affair is cleared up, don't apply to me for a recommendation: I couldn't conscientiously give you one. The way you have practised on Captain Tollington's credulity is too distressing to me."

"A less devoted wife than you are might be suspected of frantic jealousy concerning Mr. Fletcher." Olive finds the courage and the voice to say these words, and then drives away, leaving behind her a foe who will neither forgive nor forget — nor forbear.

Philip Fletcher meanwhile has gone back to town with the doleful feeling upon him that he has done with the best part of his life, and that all that is to come, thoroughly authenticated as it is, will be dull, tame, and unprofitable.



But still he assoils his conscience, and tells himself that it is Olive's vacillation, Olive's hesitation and weakness, which have brought things to this pass.

“ If she'd only had the pluck to take me at my word, without going into heroics,” he thinks, half regretfully, during the first half-hour after leaving her. But, by the time the train palpitates into the London Bridge station, Philip is sufficiently himself again to feel,—

“ It's a jolly good thing that Olive had more prudence and consideration than I had just now. A fellow who jilted Miss Roden could never hold his head up in society again.”

By way of compromising with the Nemesis which he begins to think it just possible may overtake perfidy in time, Philip writes to Madge Roden, as soon as a good dinner at

his Club has restored his mind and body to their just balance.

Writes a long, loving, amusing letter to Madge—the sort of letter that lingers in one's mind, by reason of the many pleasantly turned sentences (none of them too long) that abound in it—the sort of letter that shows a man recognises the 'mind' as well as the 'heart' claims of his future wife.

“All business that keeps me from you is of necessity hateful to me,” he concludes. “I am thankful to say my business is finished, and I'm free to go back to dear Halsworthy.”

## CHAPTER. III.

### A FALSE STEP.

HE cannot give earnest, unbiassed consideration to the question Madge has thus unexpectedly propounded to him, because of the entreaty in her eyes. A vague idea hovers about in his mind that this girl, who is as little artificial and as fair and sweet as a wild rose, has not "done specially well" in engaging himself to his cousin, who has no particular claims to be regarded as anything but a scamp. But he also has a vague idea as to the traditional fate of the man who interferes. So he steps off the delicate ground on to

which she has suddenly whirled him, and says,—

“That remains to be proved; but, at a venture, I should say that it is impossible for you to do ill.”

“You are what I ought to be—reserved,” she says gently; and then she remembers the relationship between the man of whom she is thinking and the man to whom she is speaking, and adds generously,—

“I shall tell Philip, as soon as he comes back, that I gave you an opportunity of saying something chilling and unpleasant about our engagement, and you did not take it.”

“I shall never be able to say anything that isn’t warm and pleasant about it, for I can never feel anything else,” he answers in simple faith, believing that he can guarantee his conduct for the future, as honestly and



50      “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

fearlessly as he can let the light of day upon it in the past.

“ And your mother and sisters, will they like me too ? ”

“ Like ! they’ll love you,” he replies quickly ; and Madge nods her head backwards and forwards, and says abstractedly—

“ For Philip’s sake. Well, you must all be very fond of him ; the readiness to like me proves that. You must be *very* fond of him.”

“ We are,” he says briefly ; “ but it would be no very difficult matter to be very fond of you, even if we were not of him.”

“ But they don’t know me yet,” she says, startled out of the quiet composure which has been her portion all the evening. And he knows that in some way his tongue has slipped, and words have fallen from it that it would have been better to have left un-

uttered. And so he compels himself to be common-place and a little crushing.

“You won’t accept the little compliments that are common coin, Miss Roden. You’re right : I’ll never offer you one of the sort again. No, they don’t know you yet ; but when they do, I have no doubt that you will all get on capitally together for Philip’s sake.”

She is conscious of being mortified—conscious that her mortification is showing itself in the heightened colour and foolish glistening of the eyes which mortification is accustomed to display. The impulse to recover her self-possession by the means of forcing him to confess that his last words were not uttered in sincerity, is strong upon her. But she curbs it—conquers it—puts it down under her feet and tramples upon it.

“I would get on capitally with anyone,

for Philip's sake," she says. And Phil thinks that it must be a fine thing for "a fellow to get a girl to love him so entirely" as Madge portrays that she does by this speech. Little he knows how far more entirely another girl loves that spendthrift of affection, his graceless cousin.

Presently (they neither of them know that it would be well for them to separate on the spot, and never strive again to excite a particle of interest or emotion in one another's breasts) Philip tries to extricate himself from the web of perplexity this girl is innocently weaving around him, by saying,—

"How rapidly one adapts one's self to new relations: here we are talking as if we were brother and sister already——"

"Are we?" she interrupts doubtfully.  
"Now to my mind, brother and sister would

have spoken a truth or two to each other, that you and I are holding back. I'll try to do my part now. I wish you had come down when Phil was here first ! ”

“Why ? ” he asks, without intending to ask it, after the manner of the majority who indulge in questions.

“Because, if you had been here with him, the temptation to personate you would never have been put in his path ; and it's that you all, yes, every one of you think of, and seem to extenuate when you speak of him to me.”

“I never 'did, Miss Roden,” he says hurriedly ; “really, I never thought of it as other than a foolish or, say, a wild burst of effervescent spirit that has ended in the soberest delight. The end justifies the means, even if the means had been far more reprehensible than they were.”



He says all this sketchily, clumsily, angrily, for he knows that she will not believe him. And Madge adds to all these uncomfortable feelings by replying,—

"I give up at once, if you say things in sentences to me—sentences that other people have arranged. I can't attend to you, and I can't answer you, and I can't believe in you!"

Thus far they go, this first day of meeting, and to all outward seeming it is a very little way. But Madge is gifted with what must prove to be either a great blessing or a great curse to her, namely, an exceptionally good memory. She not only never forgets what other people have said to her, but she always remembers what she has said to them. And so, when the exigencies of life in Halsworthy bring her into communion with Phil the following morning, she remembers, and re-

members with a blush, that her own words have put him on his mettle to be as frank with her as seems good to him.

Contrary to her usual habit, Mrs. Henderson has avoided making Madge her theme during the brief period which Phil the genuine has spent with her (Mrs. Henderson) alone. Sad recollections clog the ordinarily fine utterances respecting Madge which all who know Mrs. Henderson are accustomed to hear from her lips. She thinks of all those idle hopes and wishes which she had indulged in respecting this pair whom fate has thrown together, now that honour forbids the realization of those hopes and wishes. She is a good, thoroughly human woman; and though there is something sacred to her in the first pledge of love made by a pure young girl, she is full of sympathy for the possibilities which

might have been, if only Philip the true had come first.

Accordingly she does not dare to make Madge her topic; does not dare to respond when he strives to make Madge his topic. He is much impressed (so much is evident) by this girl whom his cousin has won for his bride: she has interested him; if he only suspected how much, he would leave Halsworthy to-day.

It is in vain that Mrs. Henderson tries to talk to him about his mother, his sisters, his own prospects: his attention wanders, and he gives vague answers, and vague fears enter in and abide in Mrs. Henderson's heart. "Yet after all," she asks herself, "what can happen? It is not in Madge to play fast and loose with a mouse, much less with a man."

But, for all these reassuring speeches which she makes to herself, the vague fears go on

obtaining dominion and enfeebling her nerves. She is conscious that she is presenting herself in the character of a bore to the son of her old friend, when she assiduously knocks down every little subject connected with Madge which he sets up. She is conscious of the fact, but in her dismayed perplexity she can't help herself; for she knows that she has aided in weaving the web in which Madge is getting entangled.

Presently he says (and her anxious ears fancy that he says it hesitatingly),—

“I accepted an offer of a horse for to-day from Miss Roden, and said I would go there about twelve for it.”

As he looks at his watch, Mrs. Henderson sees in his bent face more beauty, more power, more feeling, than she has ever seen in his cousin's—sees it, and sorrows at seeing it, for Madge must see it too.

"I will walk up with you," she says, feeling that she is intrusive, suspicious, ungenerous, and yet not daring to remain quiescent. "I want to speak to Aunt Lucy ; we may as well go up together."

So they go up together, and find Madge lounging in a big chair before a big fire, making no pretence of doing anything but shiver.

"I tell her she has caught a chill, and I want her to go and walk it off, or ride it off," Aunt Lucy says, anxiously appealing to the visitors to second her advice. And Mrs. Henderson turns a deaf ear to Aunt Lucy's words, and says with outward boldness and inward terror,—

"Is it a chill, Madge ; or are you disappointed by not having had a letter from Philip ?"

"I have had a letter from Philip, and

he is coming back at once," Madge says with animation. Then she takes his letter from her pocket, and reads the last words of it:—"I am thankful to say my business is ended, and I am free to come back to dear Halsworthy." "I am so glad you two will be here together," she adds, looking up at Phil, and unexpectedly surprising him with the look of that interest in his eyes of which he is unconscious yet.

"What business can Philip have in town that we don't know of?" he catches himself wondering; but aloud he says,—

"I'm glad, too. I have been looking forward to some days on old Exmoor with him."

Madge folds her letter up, pockets it, and subsides back into her chair again; and Aunt Lucy's quick eyes detect a tiny shiver.

"You have taken a chill, I'm sure of it, Madge; and nothing ever cures your colds

so quickly—before they come to anything," she explains in parenthesis—"as a gallop on the moor. The air is so beautiful and fresh, you know, Mr. Fletcher, that it's physician and nurse at the same time, my poor brother used to say."

"I really think Madge had better nurse her cold to-day, instead of going out." Mrs. Henderson feels a fresh crop of fears spring up with each sentence that Aunt Lucy lets fall. With a keen, sudden glance Madge detects these fears ; with an equally sudden resolve she determines to brave them. For the first time in her life, she is angry with her old friend ; for the first time in her life, she feels inclined to rebel against that old friend's advice. For she has done nothing, has thought nothing, has felt nothing, that can justify this dawning suspicion.

"I think Aunt Lucy is right," she says

resolutely : "a gallop on the moor will do me all the good in the world. I caught a chill from the cold looks of those cousins of Grif's. I shall forget them when Brunette and I have had a burst." And she rises up and lays a hand on Mrs. Henderson's shoulder, and gives a look of innocent, comical defiance that makes Mrs. Henderson's heart ache with love and fear.

"Will you ring the bell for me, please?" Madge says, looking at Philip; and as he obeys her, she utters the words that Mrs. Henderson has been expecting and dreading—

"Didn't you say you'd ride to-day?"

Before he can answer, Aunt Lucy interposes—

"Then you'll have an escort, dear—much nicer for you than riding alone; and Madge won't have a groom behind her on the moor," she adds to Mr. Fletcher.



And so, through no effort on his own part, it comes about that Phil goes out for a ride with Madge. And as he swings her up to her saddle, as he marks her grace, her ease, her skill, her beauty, his heart beats high with pleasure, the source of which he does not pause to analyse.

The horses afford them subject of conversation for a short time. The great merit of her good brown mare, Brunette, is a theme of which Madge is never tired. For the sake of making Madge eloquent, Phil ventures upon ground which is foreign soil to him.

"I thought ladies liked something rather slimmer than Brunette," he begins, scanning the strong, big brown mare with what he means to be a critical eye.

"Weedy horses are all very well for the flat," Madge says carelessly, though in her

heart she is annoyed at the least reflection being cast even in ignorance upon her favourite's splendid proportions ; " but, for a hilly country, bone and muscle are as requisite as beauty and breeding—aren't they Brunette ? and you have all four, haven't you, Brunette ? "

" Brunette is on a grand scale, and her manners have all the repose of caste," Phil laughs ; " but I thought ladies, who rode well, liked horses that shied about and showed off."

Madge turns lightly about the eighth of an inch in her saddle, and leans back her hand on the back of the saddle and surveys him calmly and closely for a moment.

" Now why will you talk of what you know nothing about, for the sake of saying something, when we would both of us just as soon not speak ? " she says, quietly. " How do you know I ride well ? "

64      “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

“How do you know that I know nothing about it ?” he retorts, laughing.

“I’ll prove my assertion by putting you to the test of asking you to prove yours. I do ride well,—of course, I know I do ; now you tell me how you know that I do.”

“The effect is superb, and it would not be superb if you failed in any one promoting cause.”

“Polite, but not satisfactory,” Madge says meditatively ; “however, what are the promoting causes ?”

“Your figure, your skill, your courage, your grace,” he cries, laughing delightedly ; for all this brings him into greater intimacy with Madge, and little recks he what that intimacy will eventually cost them both.

“Less and less satisfactory, Mr. Phil. Now listen : I’ve seen a woman with the figure of a Venus and the grace of a Lady Hamilton

and the courage of a lioness, ride awkwardly and badly. I'll tell you why I ride well, you poor dear ignoramus, and then when you want to win some lady's heart by subtle praises of her horsemanship, you won't blunder and say flattering words of the performance that prove you to be stronger in faith than in knowledge."

"I shall never try to win any woman's heart by flattering her," Phil interrupts; "indeed, I doubt if I shall ever try to win a woman's heart in any way."

"Pooh! nonsense!" Madge says prosaically.

"Why should I?" Phil asks foolishly, with gathering gloom; "what am I, and what have I to offer that any woman worth marrying should give me a second thought, much less a thought of love?"

As he pauses here, and looks at Madge,

she feels she ought to say something. All she can think of saying is,—

“Really, I don’t know.”

“No ; nor does anyone else,” he laughs, and recovers himself, and Madge makes an effort to change the current of the conversation.

“We have wandered from our text : shall I take up the broken thread and tell you the what and the why of my riding well ? ”

“Tell me—anything you like,” he answers, beginning to experience that rare delight in the mere sound of her voice which one does experience weakly enough once or twice in a lifetime, in the voice of a fellow-creature.

“Listen, then : my figure might be fifty times as good as it is (no, it’s not “impossible”), and if I couldn’t bend from the waist, and didn’t sit back, and down, and square, I should look like a sack if I were fat, or a

stick if I were thin ; and I might have three times as much courage as I have, and it would avail me nothing if I bungled with my reins, or worried her mouth, or let Brunette feel for an instant that I wasn't ready for any impromptu performance to which she might treat me ; and—you're not listening one bit !”

In her ardour she has turned round and looked at him, and his eyes are fastened upon her with a gaze in which there is not the faintest shadow of attention to what she is saying. There is a glow on his face, a light in his eyes, that some other thoughts and interests have conjured up.

The spell is broken. With almost a groan he recalls himself from a dazzling possibility that some demon had been dangling before his mental vision. The present is all that is his. And he dares not turn even that to advantage.

68      " ' HE COMETH NOT,' SHE SAID."

"I'm not an apt pupil, I fear," he says sadly. "Never mind ; the knowledge will never be useful to me in the way you proposed just now."

And as he says this his horse puts his foot into a grass-grown hole, and Phil is flung forward some yards on the turf, where he remains without moving.

## CHAPTER IV.

### FARTHER ASTRAY.

A MOMENT before he had been so animated, brilliant, full of life and vivacity, and now he lies flat on his face motionless, with that inert look about his form that is so full of ghastly suggestions of concussion of the brain or spine.

Every one who has been much in a hunting field must have experienced some at least of the sensations that beset Madge in an instant. The shock, the horror, the sympathy, all these are felt by everyone who sees either a man or a woman thrown from a horse, unless either he or she promptly picks



him or her self up again. All these Madge felt now—and she felt something more.

A blinding bitter grief that startles her as the thought, “He is dead,” forces itself into her mind. The shaking hands can hardly guide intelligent but bewildered Brunette to the spot where he lies. The throbbing heart impedes her breath so that she gasps as she springs down and bends over him. Trying to realize—dreading to realize how much he is hurt.

The grey horse whose false step has caused the mishap, is grazing in a docile manner on a patch of bracken close by. Brunette’s snaffle rein is over her mistress’s arm. Madge and these two horses and a few stray rabbits and the trout in the stream are the only living creatures near the man who may be dead or dying.

The desolation of it all strikes her forcibly,

and with a wailing sob she kneels down and puts her arms round his neck, and strives to lift his head and turn him on his side. She touches him tenderly, lovingly as she would a flower, or a baby, and as she puts him in his new position Brunette puts her soft warm nose against his cheek and gives an inquiring snort.

The sound or something touches some hitherto dormant spring of vitality, and Madge can't check a cry of joy as Phil opens his eyes. One arm is round his neck still, and she is bending so low in her efforts to move him that her quivering lips are almost touching his cheek. Before he realizes the dazzling vision she has released herself and is standing by his side.

For half an instant he blinks in perplexity and then he too rises to his feet, unhurt in brain or spine, thank God " she feels through

72      “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

every fibre of her frame, but rather confused by a blow on the temple.

“ Stunned, I suppose,” he explains ; “ have I been lying there terrifying you long ? ”

“ It seemed hours but it can’t be really,” Madge confesses ; “ only I thought you were dead and—it seemed a lifetime.”

“ Awkward of me not to see where I was going, “ he says with some vexation expressed in tone and manner ; “ you were right, Miss Roden, I don’t know anything about riding ; it was unpardonable to give you such a fright.”

“ Never mind that ; the joy of finding you’re not hurt much is the greatest I have ever had in my life,” Madge replies unaffectedly and so earnestly that it brings some of the life’s blood back to Philip’s brow ; “ you’ll like to go back now after such a shaking ? ” she adds.

"It would be wiser," he says slowly, looking at her and not thinking a bit of the shaking his fall had given him, "but I'll beg you to let me be foolish just for once ; let us go on."

She protests and argues against going on very faintly for a while, until he assures her that he feels "no ill effects whatever from his fall," and then she gives in, and they mount their horses again, and ride on across the lonely lovely moor.

Brightly the sun shines on the fading heather and the rich gold of the dying bracken. Sweetly the odours their horses' feet crush out of these two plants rise up and hang about them. Freshly the invigorating moorland breeze fans their brows and kisses their cheeks, as they ride on rich in beauty, and youth, and happiness.

She tells him legends of the grand old

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every fibre of his being legends of  
by a blow on the forehead a bewitch-

"Stunned, I saw that he has been born  
I been lying there and has heard

"It seemed like a dream. And whenever  
Madge confesses her voice and  
dead and it seems that he might so

"Awkward of  
going, "he says any country, and  
in tone and manner's lead without  
Roden, I don't make. Accordingly  
it was unparal moorland streams  
fright." for any point of rising

"Never a fair extended  
you're not of the wildness of the  
ever had and they "ride on  
tedly and regardless of where  
the life's they are to get  
like to go  
she adds

come upon them suddenly that

they are losing their way. They are conscious of it, and speak and laugh about it at intervals, for Madge feels sure that she will presently see some well-known landmark which will enable her to steer for the right path back to the Halsworthy side of the moor. But time goes on, and no such landmark appears. And the day begins to die.

The bright happy breeze begins to change into a strong howling wind that seems to be coming from every quarter of the heavens at once. Happily there is no rain, but the wind bites, and when they take the level and gallop, which they do at brief intervals, Madge has to bend her head down low in order to avoid the cutting blast.

"We may be miles from Halsworthy, or we may be close on its borders for all you know, I suppose," Phil says at last. He is getting keenly excited, and he cannot define even to

himself whether it is with pleasure or with pain.

"If we were anywhere near the Hals-worthy border I should know it," Madge has to confess ruefully ; " people ought to put up posts on the moor ; I am so hungry."

It is the plaint of healthy happy youth. They have been riding for many hours now and the moor breeze is brisk and appetite-engendering. " If I had only brought my flask and some biscuits," she says. " What can we do ? "

Literally they know not where they are, nor where they are going, and the day goes on dying as quickly as possible. Madge is in the frame of mind to look out for omens and magpies. Phil never in his life prayed so heartily for the appearance of a third human being as he is praying now.

Presently another ill befalls them. The grey develops what scarcely amounts to a lameness, "but a decided dip" in the leg which he had stuck into the grass-grown hole in the morning. And in mercy to him their pace grows slower and slower.

Unexpectedly the character of the land alters—there is still light enough in the sky for them to see that hedges appear, and trees crop up. They are off the Moor proper, but in what direction they have come off it neither of them can tell.

It is dusk now, as they strike into a wild road, and they cannot see though they hear cart-wheels approaching lumberingly. By this time the dip has become lameness of such a decided nature that Phil has been obliged to dismount and prowl along on foot. The light of stars is upon them as he accosts the carter with the words,



... and ...

... and ...

... in the ...

... now ...

... extract ...

...

... conscious answer

... addressed his ...

... turning on ... else

... Never in his life

... through such a

... it now stolidly by

... but a roa-ad."

... it lead to?" Phil interposes

... to gain," is the reply; "if 'e

... Charleston go forrad, and if 'e

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...

be gwain on the Moor go thicky way." Then he cries "way" to a horse that wants to go on, and "g'long" to a horse that wishes to stand still. And passes out of the view of the pair, who realize at last that they are lost in the wilds.

Slowly and rather sadly they plod on now until they come to a precipice, down which they stumble, it being the only road. It is getting late now, between seven and eight o'clock, and Madge is suffering from poignant pangs of remorse for her imprudence. "What must poor Aunt Lucy and Mrs. Henderson be feeling, what must they be thinking; what must they be suffering?"

A glimmering light at the bottom of the precipice relights the Torch of Hope in her bosom. That same torch is ignited so easily in youth. "It must be a village, and we shall be able to get a horse for you, or a fly

or dog-cart to take us home," she says enthusiastically, and Phil agrees with her, though he hasn't the faintest shadow of belief in any such good fortune as a fly or dog-cart, or saddle-horse befalling them.

The bottom of the precipice is reached, and they find themselves in a picturesquely ravine between the ridges of some of the border hills of wild Exmoor. They hear the sound of a gurgling stream, and the wail of the mighty Moor blast, and, better than all else, they hear the sound of the blacksmith's hammer! Human habitations are near them, and in that sense of nearness they find infinite relief.

Abruptly, without the warning of a single house, they come upon a slight unsubstantial shell of a place before which a lantern and a sign are swinging. The lantern shows them that the sign is that of

the "Hunter's Delight" a fine fat stag of Ten. And with a groan of relief, after the long strain of uncertainty, they pull up at the little shaky portal.

As they do so, a shabby small mail phaeton drawn by a pair of champing well-bred bay cobs dashes up to the door, and with an impulse which she can't resist, and which has a marked influence on her future, Madge springs back, and vents her admiration of them aloud.

"Look! they're thoroughbreds," she cries to Philip, who is engaged in ascertaining a few dreary facts, and as she says it and turns her beaming face towards the lighted passage (Madge always "beams" at sight of a good horse), a weird old figure glides from an inner room.

A strange old figure, the sight of whom carries Madge back a hundred years into the

realms of long long dead and gone novels and plays. An old lady, of seventy at least, whose figure is concealed by a huge coachman's coat and capes, and whose face burrows under a half high beaver hat tied down with big lappets. A product of the past. A something indigenous to the soil of Exmoor evidently : a plump floury landlord (he turns out to be the village baker as well as the village Boniface) backs with trepidation before this apparition. A landlady, whose efforts to retain her gentility in this barren region, have rendered her sparse and bony and slightly snappish, regards the new comers chillingly. But the lady with the big cloak and beaver hat greets them genially.

"Come in, my dears," she begins ; "cold riding on the moors to-night, I should say ; here's a fire," and as she speaks she pushes back a shaving that represents a door, and gives

them a view of a room that looks like a partition in a deal box, at one end of which a bright peat fire is burning. "Come in," she says, "and be warm and comfortable," and they go in, and are warm and uncomfortable.

The quaint figure follows them, and by the light of a solitary dip candle that is drearily guttering itself away in a draught, they see her as she is.

A slim, supple old woman—enveloped as she is they can see that she is this—brisk in movement, energetic in action, keen and alert in expression. The face the half high beaver shadows almost gleams with a queer half-comic, half-suspicious smile as she surveys the young pair before her.

"I heard you speak of my horses," she says presently to Madge, "and I'll tell you that I have twenty at home as handsome and

some of them handsomer than they ; I'm the Lady of the Manor ; now tell me who you are—or who your husband is ? ”

Madge has a light and ready explanation of the real state of the case on her lips, and she is about to offer it. But something checks the utterance of the ringing soprano tones, and that something is the intense expression of emotion which overspreads Phil's face, as the old lady's mistake falls on his ears.

He understands himself and his feelings clearly enough now. Madge's husband ! It is what he would give half his life to be. It is what he may never even dare desire to be. Already he loves her with the love of a man who has never wasted his affection on every fair face that has come within his ken. Already he knows that she and she only represents all that he can ever love in

woman, or desire in a wife. Already he feels that he ought to leave Halsworthy the same hour that sees her safely home. Already he is wildly, madly, desperately sure that Madge understands some of this, and is not outraged by it.

They stand there silently, foolishly enough, illuminated by the one flaring dip, and keenly regarded by the gleaming grey eyes that sparkle out from under the half high beaver hat. The expression which lights up Philip's face and betrays his feelings, has completely fascinated Madge. Pausing on the brink of the explanatory speech, she stands with parted lips and rising colour looking at him—and not looking at him angrily. Before she can recover herself, before she can recall either Philip or herself to a sense of the allegiance due to the absent lover, the old lady comes to her aid.




"I beg your pardon, my dear lady ; I've been a little premature, I see ; he is not your husband yet." And here she pauses, and nods her head, and informs Madge in a confidential undertone, that she "had actually taken them for a pair of newly-married geese ; but all the bloom is on the rye still, I see ; marriage brushes it off quickly enough."

While she has been speaking, Madge has made a mighty effort to resume that sovereignty over herself which had been shaken just now.

"He is the cousin of the gentleman I am engaged to," she explains as firmly as she can ; and then she hands her card to the old lady, and asks her if there is any possibility of their getting back to Moorbridge House to-night."

Speedily and decisively that hope is annihilated.



"There is no possibility ; you are twenty-six miles from Winstaple, and Halsworthy is on the other side of Winstaple."

"And my brute of a horse is lame," Philip grumbles.

"And I'm tired out," Madge says, throwing herself down on a chair and beginning to cry ; "still we can't stay here."

She looks appealingly at Philip, and there is infinite distress in her tone, and in her eyes.

"I will do whatever you wish," he whispers, eagerly. "I'll walk by you, if you like to try and ride on to-night."

"Mrs. Henderson will be so distressed," poor Madge goes on whimpering ; "she didn't wish us to come ; and now that this has happened—oh, dear ! oh, dear ! I don't know what to do."

"I'll tell you, my dear : " the strange lady

has been listening to every word they have uttered, and scanning every look of theirs. And she knows all their story; ay! even more of it than they know themselves yet. She has been young herself.

“ I’ll tell you, my dear; you can’t get home to-night, for there’s no one to guide you, and no horse to carry your—friend; and you can’t stay here, that’s certain; but my house is only half a mile off, and if you’ll be my guests for the night, I’ll drive you home the first thing to-morrow morning; so just step into my phaeton and make yourselves as happy as you can.”

They hesitate, but only for a moment or two, for it is the only alternative they have. And so, rather dispiritedly, they—but still with a sort of exultation—(about which they feel half guilty) they follow Mrs. Graves to her carriage, and are driven up and down a

rocky road, through wild, unkempt pleasure grounds to the door of a long, low house, where they are deafened by the vociferous barking of at least a dozen dogs.

## CHAPTER V.

### LOST AND FOUND.

FIVE days have passed since Olive the iniquitous has been expelled from the virtuous portals of Mrs. Tollington's house. Five long, dreary, disagreeable days spent by the poor forlorn girl in wandering about trying to get employment.

Naturally she is in London. Where else can women workers hope to find immediate work. The great Mart is the only place she knows to which she can bring such wares as she has—ah! “how poor her wares are,” she feels miserably; “and how plentifully supplied everyone appears to be with them.”

For five days she has toiled incessantly about the great labour market without avail. She has patiently waited her turn in at least twenty "Governesses Agency Offices," she has made two or three futile journeys into far-off suburbs at the call of ladies who "think she may suit," until they see her. And now she sits in her dusky bed-room in the boarding-house where she is staying, sick at heart, and sadly conscious that she must come down a rung of the social ladder if she wants to live.

The fees at the Agency Offices, and the inevitable omnibus fares, have terribly lightened the purse into which so very little money was put at starting. And her board and lodging is a heavy item when compared with the slender resources on which she has to draw to pay for them. The boarding-house is kept by two ancient maiden ladies,

SHE SAID."

... remarkably nice.  
... "and so poor  
... there "while her  
... she gets employment.  
... life as she sits here  
... from having traversed  
... this day—and  
... Dejection of spirit  
... weak—as is always  
... is fine. She  
... she takes her place at  
... table, round which are  
... bustling women.  
... she is seeking employ-  
... companion. They all  
... date her search  
... They all know that  
... she is poor—and  
... these her surround-  
... His infinite mercy

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has made the larger section of humanity so gentle, that they pity and are kind to her according to their lights.

“Have we to congratulate you on better fortune to-day, Miss Aveland?” the senior sister chaunts, as she hands Olive a cup of tea. The senior sister is a good, kind creature, and whenever she has time to think about Olive, she does hope that that poor forlorn one “may soon meet with something good.” Still the season has been a dull and empty one for the unprotected pair who are striving to live by means of the home they make for other women as unprotected, and poor, and anxious as themselves. And so while Olive’s money lasts she is very welcome here.


“No,” Olive answers, conscious that all eyes are upon her as the question is asked. “I’m getting weary of trying, even ; people



want so much in these days: if I had no conscience, and would only ‘profess’ to teach half-a-dozen things of which I know nothing, it would be all well; my employers would not find me out; but—I have a conscience, and so ‘unsuited to the situation’ is the verdict passed upon me wherever I have shown my face.”

All the faces at the table turn towards her as she speaks. She is such a brilliant young creature that she gathers all the interest the anxious-hearted women about her have left for anything in life but themselves. They admire a little, fear a little, condemn a little—but all like her.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t be anything but a governess?” one of them suggests, deprecatingly; and Olive is aware that there is a hard, ungrateful ring in her voice as she answers,—



"I'd be a cook if I had the skill, or a housemaid if I had the strength requisite ; having neither, I can only be a governess."

"If you wouldn't scorn the occupation," the old lady goes on, "I happen (quite by chance, indeed, *providentially*, as one may say) to know of something that would be, perhaps, better in the long run than a governess's situation, though of course not so genteel——"

"Oh ! don't say that," Olive interrupts ; "tell me what it is ; it would be vulgar to die of want—as I shall soon if I can't get work."

And then she remembers all she has lost for love ; and would not regain it at the cost of the love she has known. Olive is a true woman !

With many a preamble, and many an apology, the scheme is propounded to her,

96      “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

and at the first hearing Olive shudders—  
shudders indignantly. It is this.

“With that lovely figure of yours you would be invaluable in a show-room,” the lady says, deprecatingly, “and I happen to know that they want a young lady in the mantle department at ‘Barr and Battle’s;’ most genteel young persons in the shop, I assure you; my own cousin is cashier there.”

Poor Olive!

Little by little the possibility of doing what has been suggested to her filters through and permeates her mind. She must do something. And nothing else is to be done. Therefore, she goes up and offers herself to the awfully critical eye of “Barr and Battle,” and her shoulders are seen to be the right shape for showing off a shawl, and her figure is discovered to be replete with all

the grace requisite for the disposal of a polonaise ! And so she takes her place in the show-room, and inwardly renounces all her past life and its associations. Poor Olive !

The rate of remuneration offered by Barr and Battle for the manner in which she will display their polonaises and shawls, is magnificent when compared with the meagre sum she could ever hope to obtain as a governess. She is not to live in the house, as do a large number of her fellow-workers. But altogether, she is to be very safe, and respectable, and well cared for in this lower sphere.

But after all she does gird against the conditions of her life. She neither gives herself airs, poor, humbled, heart-sore creature, nor strives in any way to assume a superiority to her fellows which she does not feel conscious

of. But she is not one of them! Her traditions are all of another life than theirs, and they intuitively feel that she is not of them, though she is with them.

One day the mantle she is displaying to the best advantage, for the benefit of a pair of badly built young beings, who find everything "ungraceful," falls prone on the floor in limp folds, and she stands trembling and aghast as Griffiths Poynter stumbles forward, full of surprise, in which there is both joy and pain, to greet her.

Her fellows regard her jealously. The two young beings who find everything ungraceful, regard her superciliously and suspiciously, for her beauty is as incontestable as is Grif's pleasure at seeing her again. And for the last few days they have been cultivating the feeling that Grif will eventually resign himself utterly unto them, his

lawful cousins, until it has assumed the proportions of a fair flower of Hope. It is disappointing, irritating in the highest degree, to see it nearly uprooted in this way by "a young person in a shop."

They claim Grif's attention assiduously, they try to hurry him away, by pulling out watches he has given them, and avowing themselves "late for an appointment that they wouldn't miss for the world." But their efforts are proved futile. Griffiths' mind refuses to grasp anything beyond the great fact that Olive is Madge's friend, and seems to be most miserable. Possibly he may be of use to her. Possibly he may be enabled to give Madge some comforting tidings of her friend when he goes back.

"I must not keep you from your friends," she says, in a low tone, as the cousinly

glances pierce her soul ; and the idea enters in that one of them may be his bride elect ; “ men, as a rule, only go shopping with the girls they are going to marry,” she tells herself. There is nothing intrinsically beautiful about either of these girls ; it can only be the sentiment that enables him to bear the sight of the awkward attempts they make at draping themselves gracefully.

Some of these feelings make themselves manifest in the indifferent glance which she lets fall on them. Some fine turn, of which she is herself unconscious, betrays itself in the half-averted head, and lowered tones. They are very keen as to the maintenance of their dominion over Grif. They detect—and determine to denounce — all manner of subtilty in the demeanour of this “ young person.”

“ You must give me your address, Miss

Aveland," he says, handing out a note-book. "Madge will never forgive me when I go back, if I don't take a full report of you to her."

She picks up the mantle she had dropped at the first sight of him, and with it she recovers her perfect self-possession.

"Take this report of me to Miss Roden," she says coldly, "that I feel my old acquaintances can do me no greater kindness than to forget me."

"You'll let me call to see you?" he asks in a state of flushed amazement. And Olive answers definitely,—

"No! my time belongs to Messrs. Barr and Battle. I have none to give to such idle follies as friendships and old associations."

He is heartily, unfeignedly, pathetically sorry. But she is "half sick of shadows,"



poor thing, and she thinks that all this earnestness of his may be a sham, and the sorrow a shadow. There is not sufficient sympathy between Griffiths and herself for her to hear the genuine ring of the metal in every word he speaks to her. And so she wishes to get rid of him! He is but a talkative interruption to her thoughts.

But even as she gives him a limp hand in farewell, even as she raises her languid eyes to give a last look at the fussy, unprepossessing young ladies [who accompany him, an idea darts into her mind, and permeates it. Supposing she marries this man? No one would be harmed, and it might make her forget Philip.

Quick as thought all the worst of the woman comes to the fore, and causes her to change her tactics. He, seeing her relent, believes that sweetening, chastening thoughts

of Madge are leavening her harshness of a minute ago, and he feels inclined to adore that absent influence.

His cousins seeing the change, crack the nut of truth, and extract the kernel as they whisper jealously to each other—

“She means mischief.”

What she meant to do and how she meant to do it may not be told just yet. All that need be mentioned at this juncture is that she called Griffith's note book into requisition at last, and therein wrote down her address and an hour when she could receive him.

As in a dream she goes on displaying articles of apparel to women far less fair than herself during the remainder of that day. As in a dream she hears envious badinage from the many who were not fortunate enough to excite the admiration of Mr.

Poynter, and the spleen of his cousins. As in a dream she lays a train that will scorch her sadly when it explodes.

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Phil Fletcher has roughed it considerably during his journey through this world. He has seen a goodly portion of the darker side of life, and he has no "kid gloves," "perfumed curl," and lascivious lute," proclivities. He has never gone in for the character of "curled darling," or fastidious man of fanciful habits. Yet he stares aghast when he finds himself, with Madge by his side, well inside Mrs. Graves's portals.

They have effected an entrance through a spacious conservatory wherein there is not so much as a leaf, far less a flower, to break the monotonous glare of glass. It looks like a tank, and smells like a charnel vault, and Madge shivers as she passes through, and

thinks more regretfully than ever of Mrs. Henderson's face of patient protest against the ride which has ended in this. She shivers in a more pronounced manner presently when the house door of the conservatory is opened by a dwarfed female servant whose face is cut across from the right temple to the left point of the jaw by a deep red wound that looks stiff, and sore, and altogether revolting.

She admits them into a big musty hall hung round with coarse sporting pictures, of fifty years ago ; with otter heads, and foxes' tails, and the antlers of the red deer. The odour of the vault, of a dead and rapidly decaying respectability is over all these things.

The sound of a dozen tongues raised in anger, in mirth, in revelry, in savagery, reeks in from the back regions. The handmaiden

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with the gash across her face, and a candle held at the best angle for guttering, stands and stares at the unwonted apparition of two handsome, clean, intelligent-looking human beings. Six of the dogs have effected an entrance, and are yapping and yowling over a big loaf of bread which they have dragged from some recess. Six more are howling their protest outside, against their unjust exclusion. Slightly in the background the mistress of the mansion stands, keenly observant of the effect of all this on her unexpected guests.

"Welcome to my house," she breaks into the midst of their amazed meditation with a suddenness that makes them both start. "Dorcas" (this to the girl who had admitted them), "call Mr. Graves ; tell your master I want him."

The girl shambles away on her mission,

and Mrs. Graves leads the way into an apartment from which apparently fresh air has been excluded for the last century. There is in it an odour of apples, of tobacco smoke, of stale beer, of poultry, of musty books. As the feeble light falls on surrounding objects, Madge sees masses of rare old china piled up together with common modern crockery on a sideboard, above which hangs a superb Canaletti, and an indisputable Sir Joshua, together with some penny coloured prints, and appalling photographs. "It is the end of the world, and we have tumbled into chaos," she whispers, as her hostess goes out of the room, and the young pair involuntarily draw nearer to one another.

"It is but an episode that we shall laugh over heartily with Philip," Phil says reassuringly, as he takes observant note of a new-born look of fear in Madge's eyes. But

though he says this with the greatest *sang-froid* he has at command, he knows within himself that it is an episode which will set its mark on the after lives of both Madge and himself.

He knows that do what he will, struggle as he will (and, poor fellow, he begins sadly to distrust his own strength and capacity for struggling now), an amount of intimacy will be developed between them which can never be forgotten, never obliterated, never remedied. When she turns to him with those beseeching eyes, full of half-pitiful half-quaintly humorous appeal, what *can* he do but give her all the quick sympathetic companionship she mutely pleads for.

Even now they stand nearer together, just for a moment while Mrs. Graves goes out on some domestic mission connected with their sudden appearance. And as she inclines

towards him she forgets all stiff and conventional forms of address and says,—

“ Oh ! Phil, isn't this funny ? ”

“ It's too delicious,” he answers earnestly, not thinking a bit of Mrs. Graves, or of Mrs. Graves's chaotic establishment, but thinking solely and wholly of the bright young creature by his side who at this juncture is depending on him very visibly.

“ Delicious while we're together,” she says, in that foolishly vehement way of hers that makes itself manifest whenever she is gratified or excited, “ but it will be awfully dull to me when I can't look at you, and see that you see the fun of it no longer. I shall have time to gloom then about what they must be thinking at home.”

The corners of her mouth drop pitifully here, for Madge is very tired. The breezes that blow off the Moor are very health-



giving doubtless, but they are very prostrating in their immediate effects. Never in her life before has Madge longed so for a human shoulder on which to repose her weary young head. Unfortunately Philip's is the only shoulder near, and he is the “wrong Philip.”

By-and-by, a small strawberry coloured man shambles in, covered with grimy clothes that hang upon him as if he were an ill-made peg. He is closely followed by Mrs. Graves, who saves them from falling into the error of taking him for a tipsy groom, by presenting him to them in the character of,

“My husband—Mr. Graves.”

There is a lamentable want of purpose about Mr. Graves's, words, and hands, and deportment generally. He experiences the most frightful difficulties with his knees, and consonants. The first bend out helplessly,

and have to be spasmodically straightened, and the second won't fall trippingly off his tongue. He is the first specimen of this kind of thing that Madge has seen, and she recoils from him and gets nearer to Philip.

Nearer in seeming, and oh! how much nearer in reality, as he makes each movement that portrays trust and dependence upon him. Nearer to him, nearer to his heart every instant. And he dares not take her in and welcome her, because his cousin has won this blessing with a lie.

But when she puts her soft clinging hand round his arm, and gives it a frightened clasp and says,—

“Oh! don't you wish we had never come?—don't you wish we had stayed at home?”

When she says this, he is a fool and in his

112    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

folly he forgets many things he would do well to remember, and says,—

“No, darling, no, for we shall meet again to-morrow,” And Madge (failing Madge) forgets to rebuke him for calling her “darling.”

Will she dream this night of the arrival of the lover for whose advent she has been waiting all her life? Will she welcome the real Happy Prince and—find him not the Philip who came to Halsworthy first?

When morning dawns, will the thought in her mind, the thought that will make her spring to meet the new day be this: that her fellow-traveller of the day before is waiting below to greet her—waiting below, as eagerly expectant of that greeting as she is? A fellow-sinner! A fellow-sufferer! (will she thrill, and hate herself) the lover of her life.

No; none of these thoughts and emotions

will be hers for many a long day to come. But the presentiment that they are destined to overcome her finally is upon the loyal, loving girl, with painful power.

## CHAPTER VI.

### BIRD OR DEVIL !

“ I love thee so dear, that I only can have thee.”

PRECEDED by the girl with a gash across her face, Madge, after those parting words of folly with Philip, goes to her chamber, and its influences are not soothing or cheering.

It is a spacious apartment ; one candle is utterly insufficient to light up its dim recesses, so all that Madge sees at first is a desert of much worn Persian carpet, and an oasis of bed in the middle of the same ; the bed is a ponderous four-poster, the curtains of so dark a green that they look black by this faint light, hang from the posts like

shrouds. At the head of the bed is a plume of feathers. "Bah ! it looks like a hearse," she says, with a shudder of repulsion.

Dorcas puts the candle down, stumps to the door, and gets herself away without uttering a word. ' As the echo of her footsteps dies away in the corridor outside, poor Madge's heart stands still, and then thumps audibly with uncontrollable fear. Supposing anything (she does not attempt to define a possible object of dread) should come out of one of those dark distances and frighten her, where should she flee, and on whom should she call ? and, oh ! how awful this loneliness is to her.

In ordinary circumstances, and under ordinary conditions Madge Roden is the reverse of a coward. But her courage fails her now, for circumstances have conspired to unnerve her cruelly to-day. She is so shaken by the

events of the day, she is so startled at finding what a prominent place Phil has taken up in her mind, that all her self-control is forsaking her.

It is a dreadful room ; she speaks a few reassuring words to herself once and they seem to roll about and echo all around her. The walls are dark, and several even darker portraits hang upon them. These are powerfully painted pictures ; they seem to move as poor modern Madge does, and their eyes look into hers wherever she turns, and appear to gleam with sardonic intelligence.

On reviewing her progress upstairs to bed, it seems to her now that she walked through miles of corridors, past uninhabited rooms ; she knows that whatever happened Phil would not hear her, even if she yelled all her horrors aloud. As this dark view of her desolation presents itself before her, she dis-

tinctly hears a soft rustle somewhere behind her, between herself and one of the panelled walls. And in a passion of terror, such as only highly organised and intensely sensitive people experience, she retreats into a corner of the room, and scans all she can of the rest of it with widely distended eyes.

It is in vain that she tells herself that this is idle folly, foolish fear, contemptible weakness ! The dread has overmastered her to such a degree that she is sure some ghostly fright will be given her before the blessed daylight creeps in and ousts these grewsome shadows. Like a child she longs to get into bed and bury her head under the clothes, but she cannot muster up courage to cross that wide expanse between her corner and that haven of refuge, the bed.

The candle is short and spare, and burns rapidly away ; there are only three or four



inches between herself and utter darkness. She watches it with fascinated eyes, and with a choking dread of its abruptly going out with a sputter before she can make up her mind to take the leap across to what seems like a sanctuary by comparison with her present position.


Her faculties of hearing and seeing intensify themselves ; she peers into the shadows opposite, and it seems to her that the portraits on the wall are fluttering their preposterous wigs, and affectedly flirting their fans ; she is sure that their eyes are dilating, and their bosoms heaving, and oh ! one of them heaved a sigh !

Madge, blind with terror, now takes a spring that carries her to the side of the bed, and there stumbles and falls short of reaching it, for it is higher than she has been accustomed to. Still the habits of courtesy,

the habits of concealing feelings, the exhibition of which would give pain to others, the custom of her caste, in short, is upon her strongly. And in this extreme moment she does violence to her inclinations, and represses the yell of horror which wells up from her heart, and which her lips decorously decline to utter.

How shall she ever endure it, how shall she ever live through it until the blessed light comes and relieves her of the agony of uncertain outlines, and dim distances full of pictured forms that move, and eyes that dilate. Even as she half unconsciously questions thus of herself, something palpitates behind her, and the light goes out with a sputter.

In an instant flash through her mind recollections so vivid, that they seem to be painted in bright colours of all the scenes of



luring travellers to their own destruction, which she has ever heard or read of. The palpitation behind her is no creation of her disordered mind. It is a reality, a genuine sound ! She cannot reason it away for it is growing, advancing upon her. This something intangible, which is at the same time real, crushes the blood out of her heart, and renders her half senseless.

Frozen with horror, petrified by a fear that she cannot define, of something she cannot analyse, the girl on whom so many fair high hopes are set lies there alone until the morning. When the morning comes, when the “blessed light” for which she has so wildly yearned and prayed appears, she cannot take comfort from it ; for the fever of her spirit has mounted to her brain, and Madge Roden is very ill, so ill that Dorcas wandering in after much prompting with a

jug of hot water, finds it a task beyond her capacity altogether to make the "young lady know what's what."

Other and altogether new elements of confusion are introduced into that household forthwith. Poor feverish, wandering Madge is placed on the bed she had so vainly essayed to gain, and the dogs are turned out into a distant yard, and a doctor is sent for, and the owl is driven from the gloomy corner of the room from whence he had watched and fluttered at Madge the previous night. And when all these steps towards her present comfort and future restoration have been taken, it occurs to Mrs. Graves that "the gentleman ought to be told."

The gentleman in question is still sleeping the sleep of a sojourner serving his noviciate on the Moor, while the doctor stoops over Madge and utters the ominous words "brain

fever, brought on by cold and some shock to her nervous system.” And it is this verdict on the state of his already idolised Madge, that falls with almost stunning force on Philip’s ears when he eventually descends to what resembles “the lower regions” in more senses than one.

At this juncture—out of the chaos of this realm of riot—the key-note of the proper mode of action is struck by an unexpected hand. The weird old mistress of this mansion of misrule, comes forward with a perfect conception of the exigencies of the situation that staggers Phil for one minute, and compels his unwilling admiration the next.

“The young lady who is engaged to your cousin will be quite safe in my house, Mr. Fletcher, without any remote guardianship from you,” she says incisively ; “but the

sooner her other friends are with her, the better, so I should advise your taking the fastest horse in my stable (the screw you rode yesterday is hopelessly lame), and going yourself with these poor tidings to her home, without delay. The news will come more softly from you, than from a groom."

In common sense, in common honour, in common decency Philip has no appeal against this decision, though he would give all such fortune as Fate may ever bestow upon him to be suffered to lie down like a watchdog at her door. But he has no appeal ; he knows that he would be worse than a fool to protest against this really right dictum which has been uttered from such an unlooked-for quarter. And accordingly he goes as Mrs. Graves bids him ; and Madge remains in the house of a stranger moaningly unconscious, quite alone.

The bracing air of wild free Exmoor has no power this day to brace the nerves of the messenger of woe, who "rides as though he were flying" in very truth, quite regardless of the broken nature of the ground, and the possibility of Mrs. Graves's bonniest blood mare laming herself for life over it. He knows that he has been bitterly to blame in letting Madge lose herself, and he knows nothing of the innocent cause of Madge's final overthrow. Owls are constant visitors in the darker corners of the manor-house, and the servant who drove out the special one that fluttered like a thing of evil from the dim distance at Madge, has never thought of mentioning such a common occurrence as its appearance and ejection.

As he gallops by-and-by through the long narrow street of Halsworthy, emotions crowd in quickly upon him ; and he begins to dread

the look of stern displeasure which will gloom over Mrs. Henderson's face, and the agitation and tearfulness which Aunt Lucy will bring to bear upon him, when they hear his story.

The paramount thought in his mind as he rides up the avenue at Moorbridge, is—

“It will be aiding her frail hand to the heart's suicide with a vengeance, if I let her marry Philip.”

But this thought with all its saving strength deserts him suddenly, when in answer to his impatient ring at the hall door bell, a bewildered looking servant opens the door, and Philip his cousin stands out clearly, tall, and fair, and handsome, and with an immense air of having a well-established right in all things, behind that servant's head.

Philip the messenger of ill-tidings, and Philip the accepted lover, make all things clear (after the manner of men), in a few



moments ; but Madge's cavalier of the previous day has a tight time of it presently when he is brought to bay before the women, to whom Madge and everything concerning Madge is dearer than life.

He gets no pity from Aunt Lucy, he gets no help from Mrs. Henderson ; the former is weepingly incapable of considering aught but Madge's danger, Madge's suffering ; the latter is sternly disinclined to salve a conscience that, from the bottom of her honest heart, she believes ought to be seared about Madge.

And through it all he knows himself to be so guileless in act and word. As for his thoughts ! Heaven help him ! Could he help them ? They have never been given utterance to, they have never wronged her—save in that one weak moment, when out of his great love for her and pity for her solitariness he called her “ darling.”

The arrangements that are made at once are all made with a propriety, a perfection that proves to Phil "the late," as he may be called, that he is unneeded, unwelcome. He has a wretched sensation of being scouted by Aunt Lucy, and suspected by Mrs. Henderson, and simply "suffered" by his cousin Philip. And so he does his duty in a very aggrieved and outraged state of mind after all, and declares himself "ready to go back to town" directly Mrs. Henderson declares herself determined to go and nurse her favourite.

Philip the lover, Philip the prosperous and preferred, is in the order of natural selection "told off" for escort duty to the two ladies who are going over to aid and succour Madge. But before this dominant duty claims him, he has half an hour with his cousin.

When that half-hour commences, each

man means so honestly “to have it out” with each other, but somehow, each falls short of his meaning, and so the flame of truthful explanation wavers, flickers, fades away.

“I have never apologised to you for having used your sword and cocked hat, as it were, when I came a-wooing,” Philip the lover begins somewhat meanly. For it is mean to remind a generous foeman of his former generosity when a fresh conflict is beginning.

“The only thing you could filch from me was my good name,” Phil the leal says laughing with an effort; “and as we share it together——”

“Blow the name, it’s been the temptation!” Philip responds savagely; “Phil! you’ve seen the girl,—isn’t she glorious?”

“Glorious!” the other replies briefly.

“And this place isn’t to be despised?” Philip goes on interrogatively, with the airy

manner of a man who never having possessed one square inch of his own can gaily condescend to the indifferent contemplation of acres.

Phil is silent, surlily so ; to him there is something brutal, coarse, unmanly in this talk of the "place," when the possessor of it is so ill, "may be dying for all we know," Phil thinks in a burst of impotent love and fear.

"And yet," Philip goes on in a burst of self-satisfactory feeling, "with all this in my hand, as I may say, it proves me not an utterly selfish fellow, Phil. I'd give it all for a girl who has nothing in the world but her beauty and her love for me——"

"Then why haven't you given it all for her ?" Phil interrupts.

"Because—well a fellow can't make all the 'reasons why,' canter up into position at a

130    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

moment's notice,” Philip replies. “When I came down here for a lark (you know how awfully fond I always was of amateur dramatics), I didn't know what it would lead to ; it has led to this ! can you wonder at it ? ”

He asks this with an air of self-conceit that renders him insufferable to Phil. Briefly the latter says,—

“ When did you come down ? ”

“ Yesterday, about four o'clock. I was disgusted naturally, at finding Madge had gone out, and when she stayed away all night I was more disgusted than ever. You ought to have been more prudent, Phil.”

“ I know it.”

“ Indeed, if it had been any other man than yourself,” Philip goes on, “ I shouldn't have accepted the situation in the quiet way I have now ; as it is, I don't blame the girl

nor you so much as I do those two fools of women who encourage Madge in all her silly escapades."

"Mrs. Henderson is incapable of encouraging anything silly," Phil says savagely. In spite of the stern glances which Mrs. Henderson has been bestowing upon him with liberality this day, he will be just to her. She is incapable of encouraging folly in any form. She will not even smile upon a form of folly to which, in his heart of hearts, he does seriously incline—namely that he should win the girl he loves from a man who loves her not.

Mrs. Henderson is one of the women who are prompt in action. She never hesitates, never vacillates, never gets fussy or bewildered in any sudden emergency. So now she comes back from the Vicarage, having set her house in order, and organised the system

of management of it during her absence, long before agitated Aunt Lucy is ready to start.

"While I am waiting for Miss Roden I want to have a talk with you, Phil," she says to the man who has proved himself such an inefficient escort and protector to Madge.

They are alone in the library as she says this (for Philip the lover has gone to get his new travelling bag, with its beautiful assortment of bottles and brushes, ready), and Phil feels uncommonly like a culprit as he approaches his mother's friend.

She is a dear, kind, good woman, and she gentles very much in expression as the young fellow comes close to her, and waits his doom with miserable eyes.

She bends forward and rests her hands on his shoulders and kisses him on the forehead, and at that he breaks down, and with his face in his hands he says,—

“ I’ll go to-day.”

“ I knew you would, I was sure of you, Phil, my boy ; I wish none of this had happened, but as it has, you must be strong and true ; you must right the wrong I have helped to do, you must not run into temptation, nor lead her into it.”

“ I’ll go to-day,” he repeats. And then she sits down and holds his hand as lovingly as his mother might, and asks,—

“ Tell me all there is to tell.”

“ There is nothing but this—I love her and Philip does not ! ”

Mrs. Henderson winces as if a blow had been dealt to her.

“ Don’t say that, don’t think that, Phil : he may not love her with the love a girl like Madge ought to inspire ; but with his best surely ? ”

“ Philip loves another woman with his best



134    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

love, of whatever quality it may be,” Phil says, with quickly repented-of angry candour. “But I know what you mean, two wrongs never made a right. Madge shall never know how I loved her, or how little it would cost him to renounce her.”

For a minute Mrs. Henderson weighs the possibilities in the balance, and then she speaks.

“I know Madge—I know something about her that you have never thought of, and cannot realise. From her babyhood she has never broken her part of an engagement, however trifling it may be ; she has pledged herself to Philip, and she will redeem her pledge, even if she finds out that he does not give her the full share of love she bargained for. Madge is honourable in the way men ought to be ; she can’t break her word.”

There is unbroken silence between them for a few moments ; then she speaks again,—

“ I tell you fairly, that I shall never speak of you to her, never suffer her to think that you regard her as other than the most superficial acquaintance ; she is very pure, and very proud,—she will soon compel herself to forget you.”

He smiles sadly. “ And that is the thought you give me at parting to comfort me.”

“ Go and work, boy,” she says impatiently ; “ go and work and forget her. Because I have been foolish in smoothing the way to this engagement of Madge’s, shall I stand by and see a greater folly committed ; and—don’t hate me, Phil, for my blunder ! Be a man ! ”

He is quite master of himself as he takes leave of the relief-party, that is going off to

Madge presently. Quite master of himself, as in well-chosen language he expresses his earnest hopes that "Miss Roden will shortly be restored to perfect health," quite master of himself as he shakes his cousin's hand in farewell, and says, "You must keep my mother and sisters *au courant* with your proceedings, Philip ; give them time to prepare the wedding presents, and make my peace with Miss Roden for my stupidity of yesterday."

But he knows that this mastery will not last.

## CHAPTER VII.

### AS GOLD IS TRIED BY FIRE.

COMING home one evening from the great emporium where she acts as block for the better display of the millinery triumphs of "Barr and Battle," to her lodgings hard by, Olive Aveland meets Philip Fletcher face to face.

It is the day before he goes down to Moorbridge House, and he has just been making thousands of good resolutions, each one of which he is ready to break at sight of the girl whose life he has laid waste.

At sight of him, Olive gasps a silent, heart-felt prayer for strength, and it is given to her.

138    “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

There is no flush on her face, no flutter in her voice, as she says, in answer to his eager,—

“Olive! I have been mad to know where you were.”

“There can be no pretence of friendship between us. No; I would rather not shake hands with you.” And, as she says this, she walks on steadily, easily, and he stands and looks after her.

Presently he overtakes her again, and now there is anger in Olive’s eyes as she regards him.

“I shall be wretched all my life,” he begins, “if you cut me in this way. Have pity on me, Olive! you know how I love you—how I suffer in renouncing you; give me your friendship still.”

“You traitor to Madge!” she cries in a low voice, but with an amount of concentrated passion in it that portends a perilous time for

anyone who may encounter her in this mood, and run contrary to it. "You traitor to Madge—after I'd forgiven you about myself too," she adds, with a sudden breaking down of all her bulwarks, that is intensely weak and womanly.

Philip Fletcher likes to stand well with people—even with people whom he has injured. It is soothing to his own sense of satisfaction with himself always, in looking back upon past events, to remember that, whatever they knew about him, they could but seem to like him while they were with him! He values this personal power, which is his distinguishing attribute, highly; cherishes it, and appreciates it as the good friend it has been to him deserves to be cherished and appreciated. By its aid he has already tided over many a time of trial. The men of whom he has borrowed money,

on account of it forgive him for forgetting to pay it. The women to whom he has pledged light love-vows, which he has never attempted to redeem, forgive him for perjuring himself when he comes before them blithe and debonair. It hurts him, after all that is past, that Olive should be in any other passion than one of love for him.

"You are Madge's dearest friend, and there is no treachery to her in trying to keep your friendship for myself," he pleads, eagerly and earnestly. "I am going down to her to-morrow ; let me tell her that I met you to-night, and that you sent a loving message to her."

The girl is young, and full of tenderheartedness and good feeling and gratitude to Madge for all the kindness shown awhile ago, when she (Olive) needed it almost as much as she does now.

"You may say what you like that's loving to Madge," she whimpers out ; "and oh ! Philip, do you be good to her always ; do love her."

Something in the appeal goes to the very core of his heart, and selfish Philip forgets himself for a moment.

"Good-by, Olive ; God bless you !" he mutters, taking off his hat in a spasm of deep respect ; "think of me kindly now, for Madge's sake."

So he walks on, and leaves her out in the turmoil of the street alone. And she can't help contrasting this present carelessness of his with the chivalrous devotion of other days, when she was a rich man's reputed heiress, and Philip would have deemed himself wanting in every gentlemanly attribute if he had allowed her to walk over one yard of the pavement of Oxford Street in the glare of day unattended.



She feels very strangely softened and humbled, poor child, when she reaches the door of her lodgings. And at the door she meets Griffiths Poynter.

Griffiths Poynter, with an elderly lady leaning on his arm, and his card-case in his hand, calling on her properly—sparing her, soothing her, saving her in every social way. And she contrasts that other one with him, and in a glow finds that other one wanting. And her fidelity to a sham yields, and her faith in her own foolhardy adherence to a failing cause yields; and her womanly wilfulness in clinging to what crumbles under her touch yields; and she is almost as ready in this hour to receive Griffiths Poynter as a lover as she is to receive his aunt as her friend.

The aunt, untroubled by the presence of her daughter, is kindness and cordiality

itself to the young lady of whom her nephew has discreetly made mention as Miss Roden's favourite friend. For Miss Roden is a local power in the region in the which this kindly-disposed old lady hopes to see one of her daughters reigning as Griffiths's wife.

Moreover, in addition to this indisputable fact that she is acting from interested motives, Grif's aunt is kindly-hearted, and there is a forlornness about the state of this young reduced gentlewoman which is very grievous to her. It does not occur to her unscheming, unsophisticated mind that Olive Aveland, the young person who exhibits "Barr and Battle's" jackets and mantles to the best of her ability and shoulders, will ever vault to such heights of daring, even in imagination, as to dream of being Griffiths's wife. Up to the present moment she has not been under the influence of her daughters

on the subject. She has refrained from saying anything to them about this “unlucky young lady,” because Grif has requested her to do so, and it has always been a habit of hers to attend to Grif’s requests, partly because she really loves him very much, and partly because it is expedient.

“Miss Aveland, it’s the first time I ever went into a show-room for ladies’ things in my life, and to think it should have brought me the luck of meeting you again.”

He says a portion of this speech with the rapidity of utterance that is the result of his earnest desire to express his pleasure in seeing her again, and the other portion of it in the disjointed tones which are the result of a rather hurried ascent of a more than rather steep flight of stairs. They are in Olive’s small sitting-room by this time, and he knows his aunt is thinking how small it is, and how

meagre its arrangements are. And he grieves from the bottom of his honest heart for the necessity, whatever it may be, which has brought one who ought to be in an atmosphere of perpetual "sweetness and light" down to such a drear and dingy one as this.

In that small, dull, confined space these three sit for ten minutes, and make very little headway towards gaining a fuller knowledge of each other. Then Olive, who has a hatred of standing in a false light under any circumstances, says,—

"Do you think it a very terrible descent from educational serfdom to being a shop-girl, Mr. Poynter? I can see you're full of pity for me about something."

"As full of pity for you as I should be for a sister of my own," he answers promptly. Then, while Olive is looking him steadily in

the face, in the endeavour to detect any sign of false shame in this pity, his well-meaning aunt interposes with one of those excellently-intentioned remarks that are very roots of bitterness to those to whom they are addressed.

"I have no doubt, Miss Aveland, but that my nephew could find you some more genteel employment—something far more congenial to you—among his own friends ; housekeeper to a widower and governess to his children, or something of that sort."

"I certainly couldn't recommend anything of that sort to Miss Aveland," Grif replies hurriedly ; "and I'm quite sure she wouldn't attend to me if I did recommend it." And his face tingles with a sensation of annoyance that is a new thing to him as he feels that his aunt is "probably thinking how good the odds in favour of matrimony with the widower

would be in such a case," and shyly fears that Olive may suspect his aunt of the same imaginative iniquity.

But Olive's thoughts are far otherwise employed. The impulse of hospitality is strong upon the girl, and she has not the wherewithal to obey it. She quite understands that a well-arranged dinner awaits these people at the lady's home, and still she does long to offer them the best she has, to show them to the best of her ability that they are as welcome to her as if she could receive them properly.

The practical need of exerting herself if she is really to do anything at all in the way of obeying her instinct, drives all the romance of that last meeting with the Philip who had been hers and is Madge's out of her mind. She is nervous, but nervous only with household care, as she presently petitions them, in

148    “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

a voice that proves she means it, to “stay and have some tea with her.”

Grif is delighted. He would gladly stay and have a cup of hot water and a grain of salt, so long as the partaking of it procured him her presence. And his aunt accepts the invitation with a beneficence and winning condescension that is quite lost upon the young people, the one of whom busily employs herself in preparing the refreshment she had proffered, while the other busies himself equally in watching her evolutions.

There is something poetical about that tea-making, practical Griffiths thinks. The girl has got her lodgings in the house of an old countrywoman who had been cook for many years in a great county family. And during her sojourn among them she had been given many a quaint old piece of china, and many a maimed and mutilated piece of silver. By

these the young lady on her first floor benefited now. Therefore there was nothing incongruous between the girl and the articles with which she served her guests.

As she lights the gas at length, and the full light streams down on her head, he sees twisted into the crown of lustrous hair a ribbon of the rich amber hue she had been dressed in the first time he saw her. A similar ribbon encircles her neck, for though black silk dresses are the rule of Barr and Battles' establishment, Olive clings to her favourite colour, and wears it where she may.

He remembers how Madge had told him that the "Amber Witch" was a pet phrase whereby she and some other intimate friends were wont to designate Olive. Remembering this, he worries himself by wondering who the other intimate friends were, and



150    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

hopes heartily that there was no man among them. And so gradually gets silent and sad, and suffers his tea to get cold, and the spirit of the meeting to fail and die away.

“ We must be very late, my dear Grif, and I’m sure Miss Aveland must be quite tired of us,” his aunt says, vainly trying to suppress her fourth yawn, and inwardly rather aggrieved by the fact that Olive should seem to be sympathetic to Grif’s silence and sadness, to the degree of indulging the same herself.

“ Late—it can’t be late ! ” Grif says, rising up, nevertheless. Then he looks at his aunt so inquiringly that that lady is utterly bewildered by her mental efforts to try and make out what Grif can possibly mean.

“ We have had a most delightful evening,” she stammers out to Olive ; “ so quiet and friendly, you know.”

"And, though it's rather late for a call, you must please to take it for one," Grif hurriedly interposes. "My aunt's address is —(by the way have you a card with you, that's the safest way)." And again Grif looks appealingly at his aunt.

"No, I haven't a card," she replies, stringing her soul up to the awful thought of hurting Grif, reminding herself of her daughter's wrath should a shop-girl dare to come and call on them. Why won't Grif think of this? Why will he put her in such a cleft stick? Why, when he knew how very fastidious his cousins were, should he make her run counter to that fastidiousness, and then disarrange her plans for keeping her conduct secret.

All these thoughts pass through her mind as she stands trying to get her cloak adjusted, and trembling so that she cannot button it.

As she is really a good and kind-hearted woman she would go considerably out of her way to do good in any degree to this desolate girl whom she can see is a gentlewoman. She would willingly go out of her own way, but she dare not go into the way of her daughters.

Griffiths all the time thinks this reticence is simply amiable obtuseness on the part of his aunt. Therefore, though he would much rather that that lady's name and address should be courteously handed by herself to Olive, he waives that point, writes it down, and as he gives it to Miss Aveland says,—

“You have started an at-home day, haven't you, aunt? Bedford Street is too far for Miss Aveland to go and find you out.”

Before Mrs. Wainwright can answer Olive has understood the situation, accepted it, and resolved to escape from it in a way that shall not embarrass the poor bewildered lady,

whose eyes have beamed kindness only upon her (Olive).

"It is impossible that I can come," she says very gently, "though it is just as kind of you to wish it; but I am tied tightly down to my work all day, and when I leave it I want rest."

She says it so unsuspectingly, she gives her hand so cordially to Mrs. Wainwright, that she has no idea that the fears, which even she admits to be unworthy, have been detected and assuaged by Olive, who, having performed her part with the lady, turns to close the scene with Griffiths.

"I shall not see you again probably, Mr. Poynter, so I will give you a message for Madge now. Tell her where I am, and that I am well, and that I hope all the rest of her life will be happier even than her bright past. And give her my dearest love."

"I'll do all that," he says, with some emotion ; "but you must not cut me off like this ; if you have no time to go out by day, and no inclination to go out in the evening, my cousins are not situated so ; they'll come with me to see you and have tea like we have to-night, do let us ? won't they, aunt ?"

Emaciated as she has been for some time past by misery, by suspense, by injustice and insult, Olive wakes at this into something of her old self and laughs, actually laughs cheerfully.

"Good-night," she says, as Mrs. Wainwright speechless from the moment of her nephew's last observation, slides out of the room. "Good-night ; never make plans for other people ; it's interfering with the liberty of the subject, and I don't approve of that."

"But I may see you again ?"

"No," she says, impatiently. "I am peculiarly situated, and—but I needn't explain ; good-by."

"I may write ?" he pleads.

She hesitates, then says,—

"Write to me when Madge marries."

He has to be content with this concession, for his aunt is crying aloud from midway down the stairs, that "it is quite dangerous to leave a place like this without a light." So with rather an effusive "I will," he goes, and Olive is alone again.

Alone again, with better, truer thoughts in her mind than filled it before these people came. In their acknowledgment of her, in their trust in her, in the friendship he had displayed so ardently, and that which his aunt had displayed to the limited extent of her own daring, Olive derived comfort and found balm for her poor bruised spirit.

156    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

“He’s worlds too good—he’s too much of a man for any woman to make a vengeance dummy of him,” she thinks, as she takes dozens of Philip’s letters from a corner of her desk, and proceeds resolutely to tear each sheet in four pieces before putting them into the fire, “I hope he will never tempt me to marry him; and if he does, I pray that I may have the courage to tell him about Philip.”

With a calmer spirit than has been her portion since the date of her ignominious dismissal from Mrs. Wilmot’s house, with a freer heart than has rested in her bosom since Philip turned traitor, with a feeling of having a portion at least of her womanly dignity restored to her, Olive goes to bed this night.

And as she quietly sleeps, with every revengeful thought exorcised, every unworthy

ambition cast away, Griffiths Poynter is employed upon the composition of a letter which he means to post the instant he has finished it, in which he urges her, by every consideration that love can conjure up, to be his wife.



## CHAPTER VIII.

“AT LAST!”

MADGE, turning her head round on the pillow, with the sensations of one who wakes from a dreamless sleep that has been too deep to be refreshing, catches sight of a brightly burning fire, and rises on her elbow at once in her astonishment at a phenomenon which had not been there when last she went to bed in Moorbridge House.

The attitude (which by a vast effort she sustains for about half a minute) affords her a sight of more wonders that are strange to her. Somebody's ancestors are gazing at her from various panels. All the furniture

of the room, which has been grand, is now only gloomy, and large snow flakes are floating airily past the window.

She has no recollection whatever of the last ride she rode, and the last roof that sheltered her in these earlier moments of her restoration to reason and convalescence. All her dangers, all her anxieties, all her follies are blotted from her mind, which is like a sheet of white paper ready to receive the faintest impression that may be made upon it. The first impressions that are made have been described—they are tangible. The second is a dreamy doubt as to whether she is in a lunatic asylum or not. The third is that somebody she knows—two somebodies she knows are coming towards her as she falls back, feeling hollow and very liable to crack and crumble away, upon the pillow.

As these two somebodies come nearer and

even lean over the bed, stronger recollections come trooping into the mind that has been lying fallow for so long a time, and “fond memory” recalls to her the fact that she frivolously opposed herself to the gentle judgment of one of these watchers, on the occasion of her being last awake. A twinge of conscience renders her an easy prey to weakness again, and she has no strength to put her hand responsively into that loving one of Mrs. Henderson’s which is placed on her wrist.

“Gone off again !” Aunt Lucy suggests in a penetrating whisper that always becomes hissinglly distinct when she is greatly agitated. And at this despondent view of her case Madge does rouse herself to open her eyes, and smile with them, though the weary corners of her mouth cannot follow their example and say,—

“ No, I’m not, auntie dear.”

It is the first time she has spoken to them ; it is the first time she has looked at them with knowledge for a weary month, and in their joy and gladness they would both heartily like to cry and call for Philip, who has been most becomingly miserable during the whole term of Madge’s illness. But they have already decided between themselves that “ Madge must not be fluttered by the sight of Philip until the doctor says she may be so fluttered.” Which is, on the whole, a sagacious decision, since Philip is not one of the facts that fond Memory has recalled to her vividly as yet.

But, in the course of a short time, he and other persons and things come back to her, and she learns where she is, and hears how she came here ; and remembers everything ! remembers even the sound of the flutter behind her which overweighed and upset the

162      "‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID."

balance of her mind. With a shudder she turns away from that remembrance and asks,—

"Where is Philip? how is he?"

"Quite near and very anxious," Mrs. Henderson says concisely.

"Intensely anxious," Aunt Lucy adds; "the blow it was to him that morning when his cousin came."

"What morning?" Madge asks quickly.

"The morning Phil brought the tidings of your illness to us at Moorbridge," Mrs. Henderson says, taking the subject into her own hands with what she fears Aunt Lucy will think uncourteous haste. But her dread that Aunt Lucy, in the innocence of her heart, will say something about Phil that had better be left unsaid in Madge's weak state, overmasters her sense of courtesy. For she knows Madge better than the other, knows that the girl will hate and reproach herself

keenly by-and-by, if her weakness permits a thought that should be checked, a hope that should be killed.

So Mrs. Henderson goes on briskly to tell Madge that Philip her lover is, and has been all the time, waiting for her recovery, at the wretched shanty in the village which they call an inn. And Madge, who does not think so much of that part of his devotion (women always bear the thought of bodily discomfort better than men), is touched to tears when they tell her how ill, how subdued, how unlike himself in manner he has been the whole time.

"He is fond of her, then, really fond of her ; deserving of all the love and confidence she has in her to bestow," she feels, as the tears drip down on the pillow and make the cheek which presses it very damp and uncomfortable. Fond enough of her to have

become depressed and unlike in manner that debonair Philip who asked for her hand and heart before she realised (though she had theorised about it) what it would mean to her did she make him these gifts.

She realises what it will be now in this hour when she is recovering from the fever. Realises freely all that she owes to him. More than this, she realises freely all that she owes to herself, to her own promise, and resolves to pay the debt howsoever heavy a one it may prove.

"And his cousin? where is his cousin?" she interrogates very tranquilly presently.

"He went home the same day, and we have not heard from him since," with that sort of suppressed, embarrassed feeling which revenges itself for its suppression by making itself manifest in an elaborate calm, which is to be detected as spurious instantly.

"Poor fellow!" Madge observes laconically, and again for a few moments the original quietude resumes its sway in the sick-room.

But Aunt Lucy, who has been utterly hopeless for a month, and only partially hopeful since Madge began to show signs of restitution to herself—Aunt Lucy, who is hysterically grateful for the tiniest sign of interest in anything mundane that the girl she looked upon as moribund can show, fans what she looks upon as a feeble earthly flicker after the lapse of a few moments and says gently,—

"Why do you say 'poor fellow,' dear Madge? he didn't seem to be at all the worse for the long ride and exposure to weather that was enough to lay a horse up."

Madge's face is suffused in an instant with a gleam of satisfaction that is more like a sunbeam than a smile. From the cursory



166 ' " ' HE COMETH NOT,' SHE SAID."

mention made of Phil by Mrs. Henderson, she feared that he was paying some such penalty for their joint imprudence as she had paid. The relief of finding from her aunt's words that such is not the case is infinite, and Madge won't repent of her pitiful ejaculation, even though her own Philip has been loyally suffering many disagreeables for her sake at the village inn the last month.

She strengthens hourly now, and begins to take an interest in crisply narrated details of the every-day life in this mansion on the moor. She even asks to see Mrs. Graves, and, when that weird old lady stands before her, the wan wasted girl raises herself and thanks her in words that seem to glow, for the "countenance, the shelter, she gave on that awful night."

Madge is hardly conscious herself of the

fervour she throws into her thanks. Her own friends believe that it is the enthusiasm and emotional feeling which are the offsprings often of fever and weakness. But her shrewd old new acquaintance remembers the days of her own youth to some purpose, and is quite sure that Miss Roden is grateful for something beyond being saved from the cold blasts of Exmoor and the scanty comforts of the village inn. Compassionately she feels certain that the girl is grateful to the circumstances which intervened and saved her from being lead into the temptation of learning to love the cousin of her lover.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brisk breezes have been blowing over Exmoor for several days. For several days Madge has been aware of and eager to meet their beneficial influences. She has

loved to have the window opened wide, and the curtains pulled back. She has exerted herself to lean forward and listen to the voice of Nature, that sounds with such thrilling clearness up in the rarified atmosphere of these solitudes. The river that rushes through the hamlet and past the Manor House is a bubbling, bouldery, noisy one, and in its course past her bedroom it tells many a tale, and sings many a song in a loud strain to Madge. Sometimes the moor-bred girl almost shrieks out her delight at the sight of the wild fowl that go wafting by to some inland haunt. Her bright keen eyes watch with the same joy she felt when a child, for a stray heron or a circling hawk. There is a rookery in the Manor House grounds, and every evening the spectacle is a fresh pleasure to her of the rooks darkening the sky in a compact mass as they fly home.

She sits, propped up with pillows, to hear her mare Brunette led past her window at a walk first, then a trot, then a gallop. And radiantly she acknowledges that "Brunette's legs must be all right." In fact, she has, despite this long and trying illness, the morning bloom of life and joy in life about her still. She is young, and fresh and happy, and pure enough still, to go on taking interest and pleasure in unimportant things, and things that in themselves are not either pleasurable, beautiful, or interesting. But with all this keen appreciation, with all this fervent sympathy, with all this unabated interest in everything that has life and motion, there is something wanting.

She has never once expressed a desire, much less a longing, to see the man she is going to marry.

She has not been unmindful of him ; on the

contrary, she has been thoughtful for him ; sending him re-assuring messages as to the state of her health, and urgent requests that he would try and amuse himself by snipe-shooting or going out with the stag hounds. And he has obeyed her, and had some very successful nights on the moor with the wild-fowl, and days on the moor after the red-deer. He has brought home vivid reports of his exploits, and Mrs. Henderson has carefully retailed them in a way that has often roused Madge to animation, and admiration of his skill, or prowess, or courage, as these qualities may have been respectively called into play. But though she has been sending him honeyed words of encouragement to go out and pursue these mimic wars, and to come home and send her terse accounts of them, she has never sighed for, never asked for, a sight of the hero.

Old Miss Roden, whose experience of betrothed lovers, under such circumstances, has been of a limited order, ascribes this reserve to the most divinely maidenly delicacy. Mrs. Henderson knows better, and aches within herself for Madge's sake for doing so. Philip himself having asked two or three times, with well-portrayed ardour, if "Madge didn't want to see him," and having been put off each time in a lame and impotent way, resigned himself (as well as he could, knowing, as he did, that those around were noticing it) to the facts.

Therefore, he is surprised this day, when just as he is about to mount his horse and ride to a meet, a couple of miles off, Mrs. Henderson hastens up to him, and says,—

"Philip, will you come and see Madge; she wishes for you?"

"At last," he says; and he can't help say-

ing it with a half-smile and an expression playing about his face that is not that of a pleased and happy lover.

Rather slowly (according to Mrs. Henderson's way of thinking) he lifts his leg out of the saddle again, and prepares to follow her. The whole thing strikes him as inopportune. His day had promised well. He had secured a mount more entirely to his satisfaction than any it had been his luck to get since he had been hunting down here. The hounds were celebrated ; the day was fine ; the field, it had been announced, would be an exceptionally full one. And he had to give up all these things because it was a girl's whim that she "wished to see him" at this exact time, when she had so contentedly gone without seeing him for over long.

"Remember how ill she has been," Mrs. Henderson says warningly, as she pauses for a

moment at the door. As he nods his head in response she opens it, and he sees Madge once more with all relations unchanged between them.

She is sitting in a square, high-backed chair, wrapped up closely in a silver-grey dressing-gown that is bordered and brightened with rose pink. Her eyes are bright, her mouth firm and smiling, her complexion clear and warm. She is one of the women who, by reason of their intense vitality, always look better in health than they actually are. It almost disappoints the man, who has been lodging at an inconvenience to himself for more than a month for her sake, that she should look so little like an invalid. He does not see the effort she makes to look bright and move easily. He does not feel the tension of her nerves while she constrains herself to seem "very much better," in order



not to distress him. He appreciates neither her resolution nor her affectionate subtlety ; for he does not understand them.

The room, an anteroom to that dark chamber wherein poor Madge had been lying ill so long, has been carefully put at its best by Mrs. Henderson, under Madge's orders. It was Madge who had begged that hyacinths and tulips might be sent for and spotted about in hastily improvised jardinières at every turn. It was Madge who had declared for a chair instead of a couch, in order that he might think her strong. And Mrs. Henderson, knowing all these things, unjustly hates Philip when she sees how quietly he believes all he is, and how little grateful he is for the self-abnegation of Madge, of which he knows nothing.

Madge will rise up as he nears her, and when he is encircling her with his arms, he

repeats his own words "At last," in a most effective manner, a manner that differs widely from the one in which he had last uttered them (has he not avowed a love for and proficiency in amateur dramatics?).

"Dear Philip, I sent for you the instant I could—the instant I came in here; I knew you'd like it," Madge says, not at all in the tone of one who offers an explanation, but rather in that of one who mentions a most gratifying fact.

"And I came the instant you sent for me; still the time has been long enough since we met before to justify me in saying 'at last'?" he questions, quietly. And a sense of disappointment and disapprobation of self steals over Madge. She has evidently failed in rendering something that she ought to render to him.

She subsides back into her chair and puts

176    " 'HE COMETH NOT,' SHE SAID."

her hand on the sleeve of his short riding-coat.

"You were going hunting to-day, Philip?"

If she had said, "You are going hunting to-day," Philip would have offered to forego that on which his heart had been set for the last three days. But as she said, "You were going," he girded against the implication.

"I was, certainly, and I scarcely thought that, as you have done so well without me all along, you would command my society for more than half an hour to-day, dear."

He tries to say this playfully, but Madge understands him very well, and knows that her lot will be a hard one with this man, whether he loves her, or whether he does not.

"I am glad you're going," she says quickly, but all gladness is gone from her heart, poor child. "I am glad you're going,

Philip, for the day is so fine, and a burst over the moor does every one good, I think. And I tell you what” (she draws nearer to him as she says this, and snuggles her hand more closely into his—he has been holding hers all the while)—“and I tell you what. Brunette knows the work so well, and would carry you splendidly, and—I wish you would ride Brunette, Philip ; she’s my pet horse.”

“I was just getting on her when Mrs. Henderson came and told me you wished to see me,” he says, quite coolly ; and Madge, as she lies back with a beating heart and a face that is flushed scarlet, is told by Mrs. Henderson that she really must not excite herself any more to-day—she really must let Philip go. So Philip kisses her and goes off on Brunette gladly enough, and for the remainder of the day Madge is strangely silent. “Will he always take everything for

TO THE OTHER SIDE SHE SAID.

"I wish," she whispers, "if he had loved  
me, would he have treated her own horse as  
his own property, where she had asked him to  
do so."

With these thoughts in her mind she has to  
get an inspection of two pairs of anxious  
eyes. And it is the longest and most  
important of her lives.

## CHAPTER IX.

### POOR BRUNETTE !

“Woe worth the chase, woe worth the day.”

HANGMAN'S HILL scowls in front of him, a barrier of gloom to the good stag who has run for his life five-and-thirty miles already this day. The ascent begins to be more abrupt, and only a few stragglers remain of the fine field that started in the morning. The rest have “fainted, and faltered, and homeward gone,” long before Hangman's Hill is gained.

Foremost among these stragglers, well up with the master of the hounds himself, is Philip. Brunette has proved her knowledge of the country satisfactorily. She has been

180    " 'HE COMETH NOT,' SHE SAID."

in a good place all day, and still she is going easily.

Philip Fletcher is a skilful and daring, rather than a merciful and sparing rider. But the evidence this day is certainly in favour of his having ridden Brunette with kindness and discretion, for the bonny brown mare is unpunished still.

Suddenly, in front of them, rises one of the regular moorland stone fences, at a short distance from them still, but starting sharply out of the ground, as objects do start out in this light. Philip feels that more than one horse will refuse it, that more than one will fall, but Brunette will not falter.

Nevertheless, in spite of this faith in her pluck and her prowess, he mistakes a certain cautiousness, with which she approaches it, for unwillingness. Her apparent hesitation develops his spirit of impatience, and he deals

her a blow and digs his spurs into her heaving sides with a force that makes her bound in her stride and fly the fences well in advance of the others.

As soon as she is over, instead of continuing the ascent in the direction he knows the stag and hounds are going, she turns to a downward incline at a pace which he speedily realises he has no power to control. He gives her one long, steady pull, and she flies along the faster ; and then the mare has a second and fiercer edition of Philip's practical ideas as to justifiable punishment.

He has no fear for himself. With all his faults, the man is an accomplished rider ; and so, with a certain pleasant conviction that the "wayward beast will get the worst of it," he deals her a blow well between the ears, and digs his spurs into the sides that Madge's rosy, loving face has been laid against



caressingly dozens of times. And he knows this. He cares little enough for her terrific pace. She has spoilt his fun by her burst, and now she shall go on for his pleasure. So she goes on till she seems to kick the moor from behind her, and drops suddenly into one of those wooded roads, which often rise and stagger one on the borders of the barren waste. And now he tries to turn her in her stride, but she goes straight, and he repents him of his severity a little when her head comes into furious collision with a tree, and Brunette drops down dead under him.

No thought of the sorrow for her horse that will be Madge's portion adds poignancy to the pain he feels at being left here in some humanity-abandoned spot where he has no landmarks. His brandy flask is empty. Sandwiches, that have been made for more than half an hour, he always looks upon as

masses of corruption ; therefore, as soon as he recollects the case he carries, he shudders away from the recollection. He does not possess that exhaustive capacity for cursing which characterised the one who wrote,—

“ Whether he’s out, or whether he’s in,  
To me it matters not a pin ;  
Be every curse of every sin  
On Maurice Darcy, Knight of Gwynne.”

But though he does not possess it in the like degree, there is a good deal of force and power in the curses he calls down upon those men of North Devon and Somerset who have gone on and left him in the wilds with no other companion than the carcase of a dead horse.

His only guides out of this difficulty are his natural intelligence and his knowledge of the position Hangman’s Hill occupies with regard to another beacon, which has a position he will recognise (if he ever gains it) with

184    " ' HE COMETH NOT,' SHE SAID."

regard to a hill on the Somerset boundary-line. Once there, the will be in a region he knows. So he strikes out bravely enough in the direction he believes to be the right one, without a single sad, back thought of dead Brunette, beyond the natural regret anyone must feel at the destruction of a good horse.

He must be left to follow his path over the weird moorland, through the rapidly darkening night, alone. Another claims us for awhile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It is hard lines for a fellow, after being coaxed down against his will, to be kicked out in this way," Phil Fletcher soliloquises, as, after that total renunciation of every wish he had respecting Madge, which he had offered as a voluntary sacrifice, he mounts the top of the four-horse coach which is to

convey him back to the realms of railways. He feels very much as if Philip, his cousin, were a dishonest reproduction of Esau,—feels as if he had been defrauded of his birthright, and given not even a mess of pottage in exchange.

‘ Mrs. Henderson’s last words of advice ring in his ears, as the horses take a perilous descent at full gallop, and the coach swerves from side to side like a rolling steamer in a storm. “Go and work, and forget her, boy.”

It is so easy to give advice, he reflects, and so uncommonly hard to act upon it. There is no chance of his “forgetting her” in the work he is doing now. That has become too purely mechanical, in spite of its being the keeping of accounts, the disarrangement of which would ruin a mighty house. Still, though it exercises his calculating, it does not exercise his intellectual qualities, and poor

186    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

Phil knows that there will be no “nepenthe” for the memory of his lost Madge in it.

The way out of the western counties is a weary one when one is longing to be in town. And though Phil is not actually longing to be in town, he is longing to be on the high road to some new and absorbing occupation,

There is no welcome pre-arranged for him in the little house in Chelsea, for the simple reason that his coming is unexpected. But he has a very hearty spontaneous one from Chrissy and Mabel, and a very softly, tender one from his mother, whose wistful eyes detect in a moment that there is something amiss with her boy.

She delights in hearing details concerning Mrs. Henderson, whom she can only remember as a bright, bewitching, if not, strictly speaking, beautiful girl. She delights in hearing details concerning Mrs. Henderson’s

husband, and house, and daughters, and duties. But, to her son's surprise, she is unaffectedly unconcerned about Madge.

"If she makes Philip a good wife, he will make her a good husband," she says at last, when Phil rather awkwardly introduces her into the conversation ; "but I fear, poor boy, that he has bowed his pride to his heart in the matter, and that she will make him suffer in both."

In his amazement, in his wrath, in his savage bewilderment at Madge being so misplaced in any one's estimation, much more in the estimation of one whom he loves and esteems as he does his mother, he bursts out with a truth,—

"She's a thousand times too good for him—I've never known him do any good yet in his life, but he never did anything half so bad as this before."

188    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

“As what, Phil dear?” his mother asks in the soothing tones in which one addresses an incipient lunatic.

“As his engaging himself to Mad—Miss Roden; she’s not to be spoken of in the same day with Philip; you’ll adore her, Mum dear.”

“As you do already,” his mother thinks pityingly. But she says nothing. Only this unspoken sorrow of her boy’s sits heavy on her heart, and her subdued manner soon calls them all into active service about her, endeavouring to assuage what they believe to be some additional bodily suffering. But bodily suffering she bears without wincing. This dread that her ‘boys’ may learn to do less than love one another is harder to bear.

When she goes to bed this night Mabel and Chrissy turn to him with more questions concerning Madge.

"Is she a regular innocent country girl, or will she crush us with fine-lady airs when she marries Philip? Somehow, though he has said very little about her, he has given us the impression that the less she sees of us, his poor relations, the better she'll be pleased."

"Confound him for his lying impressions!" Phil blurts out in a rage. "I beg your pardon, girls; but the whole thing is a hideous nightmare to me, and I'm afraid if I throw it off that the reality will be worse."

All this is very mysterious to Mabel and Chrissy, as it would be to everyone else who didn't chance to be in the secret of his feelings respecting Madge independently of his cousin. And he knows that it must seem to them like the "blood and death" at a penny show—a mockery and a sham.

Wisely they refrain from saying anything more on that subject, and presently, in order



190     “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

to give them something fresh to think about, he says,—

“I’m sick of that office work. I wish I could get something that would give me more to do and to think about.”

“A certainty is always nice,” Chrissy says reflectively.

“But Phil could afford to do something more congenial now,” Mabel says sympathetically, and this sympathy, though it does not make him more dissatisfied with his present position, emboldens him to talk about altering it more openly.

He dismisses the subject until late that night, and the end of it is that he is made to understand that his sisters won’t think him a reckless wretch even if he does “throw up the certainty and try for something else that will give him more to do and to think about”—that may perchance turn out to be

the work that may enable him to forget Madge !

But before Phil can take any definite step himself towards altering the pattern of his life, chance kindly steps in as he is wont to do, and spares Phil the responsibility.

In worthy imitation of some of the nobles of the land, a member of Parliament and great county magnate, desiring to make his second son a partner in a great house of trade, comes to the very house in which Phil is employed—and Phil as representative of the house on several occasions is thrown much into the society of the lad, who takes a lad's liking for him.

Before the negotiation is completed Death intervenes and carries off Mr. Westcott, the father. And then False Pride in the mother's heart breaks it off altogether, and Ronald Westcott is " saved from the degradation of a

desk," as his mother terms it, and given unlimited time to "choose a profession."

Finally it arranges itself in this way. The lad bargains only for one thing, and submits himself to his mother's judgment in all others. "If you can get that jolly fellow Fletcher for my tutor, I'll do as you like," he tells his mother. So Phil is offered a stipend that makes his renunciation of the certainty a very minor matter, and he accepts it and the situation after very brief deliberation.

Ronald, a handsome, thin, lithe, tawny-haired boy, with the beauty and grace and breeding of a greyhound, is only eighteen, but already Mrs. Westcott believes him to be the object of any number of matrimonial designs. And so, when an invitation arrives for him to spend the last weeks of the year at his uncle's house, in what his mother calls the "wilds of the country," she commands

that Phil goes with him to guard him against some cousinly snares which she suspects.

“My brother-in-law, Mr. Francis Westcott, is a very good sort of man” she explains to Phil, “but his wife is a person of whom I never approved ; her father was the apothecary who attended the servants of the family when the Westcotts were in the country. *I* acknowledged her when she married, but we have never been intimate.”

Phil accepts this information with a careless, amiable indifference that irritates the lady who offers it. But “Ronald is so absurdly fond of him” she remembers, and she wants his restraining influence over Ronald.

“The girls are pretty, but it is beauty of an order that stamps them as under-bred at once ; they are large and fair and fat by this time, I should think ; then again they’re so

loud and boisterous and overpowering in their manner, that if one of them trapped Ronald I should never get over it—never ! I want you to promise to see that nothing of that sort happens ? ”

“ You had better let him alone, and he won’t think of marriage for the next ten years ; if a word of warning is said to him, of course he will propose to one of his cousins at once,” Phil suggested.

“ But you will go with him ? ”

As he has been engaged for the express purpose, Phil thinks this question an idle one. Nevertheless he assents to it.

“ Then I rely upon you,” Mrs. Westcott tells him with a fervent pressure of the hand, that Phil is quite conscious he does not deserve.

“ And you will meet him at Paddington by the half-past eleven train on Saturday ?—I

shouldn't feel happy for him to arrive at Delabourn without you?"

"Certainly I will; may I ask in what direction we go?" Phil laughs; "when I asked Ronald just now he said, 'Oh! on the borders of what's his name,' which was vague."

"It's somewhere in Somerset or Devonshire," Mrs. Westcott says. Then she adds, scornfully, "Not a family place, understand; merely rented by Francis Westcott, because he likes the scenery about Exmoor."

"Oh!" Phil rejoins as he takes a hasty leave; and he spends the rest of that day in trying to determine whether Exmoor is a sufficiently wide tract to justify him in approaching one of its borders again. Or whether his promise to Mrs. Henderson—his vow to himself—does not demand that he should throw up this appointment, and leave Ronald to his own devices?

Ultimately he comes to the conclusion that it is a sufficiently wide tract to justify him in going. And so Mrs. Westcott's plans are not deranged.

They have been at Delabourn a week. They have gained the freedom, so to say, of the freest house in the world. In all respects, Phil finds himself treated like one of the family by them all. The master and mistress of Delabourn, are a happy, hearty couple, who are quite on good terms with the world that looked upon theirs as a misalliance : quite on good terms with it, and quite contented that it should think what it pleases of them and theirs. The two daughters are, as Mrs. Westcott insinuated, fat, fair, large, handsome girls, full of spirits and chaff, which they have learnt from their two brothers, one of whom is an Eton boy, the other an Oxford man. Phil lets

himself like these girls very much, for they are so utterly unlike Madge in their hoydenish thoughtlessness, that there is no disloyalty to his love for her in his doing so. He feels quite safe with them, both on his own account and on his pupil's. They will never either try to trap Ronald, nor will they misunderstand him (Phil). They call him by his christian name, and request him to "just go and get them" whatever they happen to want, as readily as if they had known him all their lives. In fact, they regard him and disregard him, very much in the same way they do their own elder brother.

Delabourn, though it has not the honour of being a "family place" of the Westcott's, is a fine specimen of an English home. A good granite house, grown the colour of a Danish crow, standing in a hollow flat,



almost surrounded by a belt of trees, with a grand view of Exmoor through the opening where the belt gapes. The air is pure, bright, fresh, invigorating, and still they are sheltered from the rasping moor winds. If Phil could only cease from wondering perpetually in which direction Halsworthy and Moorbridge House may be, this bracing air in which he finds rest would do him good. But he does not know, and he dares not ask, and the puzzling over the problem in private, neutralizes the good effects of the change.

The life they lead here is a primitive one. They dine early, and have ponderous suppers, which, somehow or other, do not give them nightmares. In the matter of digestion, indeed, "the strength of each individual young Westcott is as the strength of ten." It may be because their hearts are pure, or

it may be because they take very violent exercise after their latest meal.

They have a carpet-dance nearly every evening, for their house is always full of guests, and one night, when Phil is plunging round in the *trois temps* with the handsomest and heaviest Miss Westcott, there comes a sharp pull at the porter's bell, and the next minute a strange gentleman, who has lost his way hunting on the moor, is introduced into the midst of the most hospitable family in the world.

They are all about and around him as Phil and his partner pull up, and with a savage wish in his heart that he "had never heard of the Westcotts," Phil recognises his cousin—Madge's lover.

## CHAPTER X.

### GRIF'S TROUBLE.

"'Tis only being in love or debt, that robs us of our rest."

AFTER the receipt of that letter from Griffiths Poynter, Olive is happier even than she was on the previous night after her visitor's departure: happier and more decided as to her own course of conduct.

She is only a woman, and, cruel as it may seem, it is the truth—she is much happier for the knowledge that Grif wants to marry her, though she is quite resolved never to marry him. She is much happier for this proof that he is ready to play the part of King Cophetua, though she has

lapsed into a position which, in her estimation, is lower than that of the beggar maid's.

She answers his letter in a flush of grateful enthusiasm, giving him her negative as gently as she can, but making it a clear negative, for all its gentleness. She tries to play the part of guide, philosopher, and friend to him, counselling him, with no affectation of humility, but with a good amount of common sense, to seek a wife in his sphere. "I know what I am, and you know what I am," she writes these words with a pardonable glow of pride, "but your cousin would never forget the fact of having seen me at 'Barr and Battles,' even if I loved you well enough to marry you. But you deserve better love than mine, and I feel this to be the case—luckily for you." And then she went on to tell him something of

that cloud which Philip Fletcher had cast over her life.

As soon as she has time to think soberly after despatching this letter, she recalls this confidence of hers, and thinks how supremely foolish she has been to make it. "What could have induced me to wear my heart on my sleeve in such an idiotic manner," she asks herself in the futile way in which we all of us at some time or other of our lives have to repent of similar idioticy; "because a man has wanted to marry me, why must I go and tell him that I have wanted to marry somebody else. I shall not be happy now till I see Mr. Poynter, and find out whether he suspects who that somebody else was or not."

Perhaps there might have been a taint of original sin in this desire for further communion with one whom she had desired to

think no further about her? Perhaps there might have been a spice of coquetry in the wish to see Grif again. But more probably it was the human longing for companionship of its own order; and Grif's is the only companionship of that kind that she knows will be accorded to her gladly, eagerly, now that she has been forced to take office that she feels to be one continual degradation to her.

Griffiths at home in his aunt's house in Bedford Street, riding at anchor on the bosom of that family harbour, which is landlocked, so to say, by seven cousins, receives his letter of rejection by the five o'clock post, just as they are regaling him with afternoon tea.

The Misses Wainwright rather pride themselves on their afternoon-tea arrangements. They have it out of a picnic set, in which

Rose-de-Barri, turquoise, blue, green, and clear yellow hues run riot in what they believe to be a conscientious imitation of old Sèvres. When they get Grif on a low, fat chair in front of a big fire, with one of those cups and saucers in his hand, they feel as if they had him at their mercy, and might marry him without delay. He is always more affectionate to them at this hour: not with any design of raising false hopes in their expansive hearts, but because he feels that he is a miserable impostor for joining in this tea orgie at all, and that they deserve some compensation for the wretched deception he is practising on them by professing to like it.

A wafer of bread-and-butter that melts in his mouth and nearly makes him sick, has just been handed to him by one sister, and the most precious cup of all the set has

been given into his unappreciative hand, when the postman's knock causes his heart to quail, and his naturally florid face to turn as nearly white as it is possible for it to turn. He knows that Olive will answer him at once, and he feels that if he misses two such girls as Madge and Olive—why he will never try a third, that is all.

A trim parlour-maid brings him in a letter on a salver, and his nails rattle against its plated surface as he picks the letter up. For a long, long time, Grif will never see a salver without hearing that rattle, and recalling the nervous sensations which caused it.

He reads it: and as he reads, something in his face convinces his cousins that it is "from a woman," and they hoist family danger-signals to one another; for it is as if they were entering a tunnel. All is in



206    “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

darkness around them ! To the best of their knowledge, Grif never in his life had a letter from any other woman than one of themselves before.

One of them (the same one whose shoulders were being mantled that day in “ Barr and Battle’s ” show-room, when he met Olive for the first time in town), whose hopes are highest respecting Grif just now, because he has amiably suffered himself to be dragged round shopping with her, is the first to speak. She says, as carelessly as she can,—

“ Any news from the country, Grif ? ”

“ It’s from a friend in town,” he says, briefly, and goes on reading it.

More danger-signals are hoisted ; and one of the sisters says,—

“ Do you know when Miss Roden is coming to town ? ”


He shakes his head.

"I suppose she will come up before her marriage?"

"I hope she will," Grif says, heartily, for he is thinking that he will get Madge to intercede for him with Olive, and as yet, of course, he knows nothing of Madge's illness.

Silence glooms over the party after this, and at last the seven Miss Wainwrights rise, and say they "may as well go and dress for dinner." Grif casts a palpably appealing glance at his aunt. It says, as plainly as possible, "Stay;" and some of her daughters see it, and suspect at once "that mama knows something, which she has not told them, concerning this woman unknown and Grif."

Mrs. Wainwright who has risen with her daughters, falters under that glance, and



208    “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

falls away back into her chair, with a vague statement to the effect that she “can’t bear to move from the fire.” She is intensely miserable, for she has a presentiment that Grif is about to repose some honourable confidence in her, which will prove a white elephant, not to say a bitter burden. But she can’t help herself; so she stays, and meekly prepares to receive it.

The instant her daughters are out of the room, her presentiment is realized.

“Aunt,” Grif begins, “you won’t be very much surprised to hear that I made Miss Aveland an offer this morning?”

In this supreme moment, Mrs. Wainwright sees all the hopes her sanguine daughters have been entertaining for years crumble at her feet, and the dust of their ruins nearly chokes her. She can’t speak: she can only gasp.

With the selfishness that a sorrow of this kind is almost sure to engender, Grif sees nothing of her emotion. He is thinking only of Olive. Not that his thoughts of Olive are selfish, for what good is worrying himself about that sorrow of hers to which she has alluded in her letter, "which can never be blunted and never be healed," she says.

"And this is her answer," he goes on, tapping Olive's letter; and at that, Mrs. Wainwright's choked utterance frees itself.

"Oh! Grif," she says, brokenly; "to think you should have been led away by a girl like that; I'm sure if I'd suspected anything of this sort, nothing would have induced me to put my foot inside her door."

His mind is too full of his trouble for him to take in the full meaning of the reproof, but he does understand enough of it to say,—

210    “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

“ What on earth are you talking about ? ”

“ Why about this young person,” Mrs. Wainwright answers, lashing herself up into the display of a pretence of spirit by the thought of her daughters’ feelings and sayings on the subject when they hear of it. “ Why about this young person ; there must be something wrong ; no respectable girl of good family would be suffered by her friends to be in such a position ; and to think she should have trapped you.”

Grif is very tolerant to every form of womanly weakness. So now he only leans forward and clasps his aunt’s hand, and says,—

“ Don’t say any more, aunt dear ; she has refused me.”

Mrs. Wainwright disbelieved in many of the modern articles of social faith. She disbelieved in the education of the masses—in

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the milk of the metropolis—in co-operative stores—and lady doctors. But in none of these things did she disbelieve half so heartily as in the possibility of any woman who was free, refusing to marry her nephew, Griffiths Poynter, the head of the house.

“Then depend upon it, she has a husband living, and is afraid of being had up for bigamy,” she says, with such an air of grave conviction, that Grif, in spite of his disappointment, can’t help a burst of laughter, under cover of which Mrs. Wainwright gladly retires.

But when she is mid-way up the stairs she finds herself encircled by Grif’s strong arms.

“Look here, you dear old auntie,” he says, coaxingly, “of course that’s all bosh that last suggestion of yours, and I’m not going to have a faint heart about Olive. I had it with another girl” (“Not with one of his cousins,

I'm sure," Mrs. Wainwright thinks) "and I've lost her, but I'll not lose Olive Aveland for want of trying; will you go to see her with me to-morrow evening? You must."

She would rather that he asked her to go down in a diving-bell, or to take in *Macmillan's Magazine* for her housemaid. Still she can only say,—

"If you wish it."

"I do wish it with my whole heart; I'm not going alone, and you can shut your ears, you know, or I'll whisper," and he laughs quite gaily, for he feels sure that his pertinacity will be rewarded with success. Poor Grif! He little knows that it is not for his coming that Olive is doomed to wait.

"If I must, I suppose I shall," she replies, getting herself away from Grif with an effort, as she hears a bedroom door open. Then she goes on to meet them, feeling that cir-

cumstances have made her sin against her daughters.

They surround her—swarming in their big dinner dresses all over her room as she changes her cap with shaking hands, and puts something light over her shoulders by way of looking festive. And they ask her who that letter was from ? and what Grif said to her when they came out ? and if she can imagine who the woman can be, and when he can have met her ? ” until she is harassed into making ample confession of all she knows about it.

With all the Miss Wainwrights are practical. So they hear the confession, and then say, they “ must speak about it after dinner ; it won't do to keep Grif waiting.” So they go down to dinner, and Grif, being very much absorbed, does not notice that they are all more or less constrained with him.



The following day Mrs. Wainwright is torn to pieces. Her daughters tell her that she “ought not to go and countenance anything of the sort,” and the memory of her promise to Grif lies heavy on her heart. The excitement, the agitation, the disappointment make her ill, and opportunely bring on a bilious attack that sends her to bed completely prostrated. And then the eldest Miss Wainwright—the cousin who has resigned her own honourable intentions towards him in favour of her younger sisters—approaches him.

“Grif, dear,” she begins, “I am quite old enough to speak to you on a very delicate subject.”

Grif, who is inducting himself into a pair of faultlessly fitting, pale-grey gloves, gets scarlet, and frees his hands at once, feeling that something will be said that will prevent his taking the air with a light heart, and in

gay attire this day. Instinctively he looks round, and sees, with dismay, that the other six cousins have retired.

"I thought it better not to say anything to you before the girls," Miss Wainwright commences, solemnly, "especially before Arabella" (Arabella is the one whose hopes are brightest at the present juncture), "but, my dear Grif, I may speak to you as a sister, may I not?"

Grif assures her that she may.

"Poor mama is too ill to venture to attempt to do it, though she feels it to be her duty, she has with much reluctance delegated her duty to me." And then Miss Wainwright proceeds, with much effusion, to expound her views concerning the young person at "Barr and Battle's."

"She's as well born and bred, and a precious deal better educated than we are,"

216    “‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

Grif states. And Miss Wainwright, with much practical, worldly wisdom, shakes her head and answers,—

“And if she were fifty times better born and bred and educated than we are, or than she is, all these facts would be as nothing compared to the one that she has been a show-room girl in a London shop ; I can’t, help it, Grif, neither can you ; we can’t gag people even if we tried, and people would talk ; do give it up, dear ; she has refused you ; why go and humble yourself to a girl you ought not to marry.”


Grif is full of good family feeling, so he merely thanks his cousin for her kindly interest, and refrains from telling her how sorry she will be for this, if ever he does win Olive for his wife.

They know that he is slipping from their grasp when, by-and-by in the afternoon, Grif

goes out telling them that he shall dine at his club to-night, for, however things go with Olive, he knows very well that he will be in no mood for the home circle.

Olive has finished her day's work abroad, and now that she has had her tea, there remains nothing more for her to do. True there is the real womanly panacea of needle-work, but Olive does not care for needle-work very much, and very rarely touches the little feminine implement unless she has holes in her gloves or collars.

The gas is lighted, and it is just seven o'clock. Oh! the weary hours that she will have to pass before she will feel justified in going to bed and striving to forget her troubles in sleep. The long weary hours, with no books, no music, no pleasant intercourse with her fellow-creatures to fill them! The prospect of her solitude overpowers her



218    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

in her desolation, and she lays her arms on the table, and her head on her arms, and is preparing to indulge in a headache-provoking, hearty cry, when,

“Mr. Poynter,” is announced.

He has been inflating himself with hope all the way as he came, and the contrast between his appearance and the dolefulness which she had been anticipating strikes her joyfully, and makes her give him such a warm greeting.

“I am glad to see you, oh! I’m so glad to see you,” she says, rising up and advancing to meet him with a fervour she had never infused into her manner towards him before.

And then she remembers that only yesterday she refused to marry him, and the awkwardness of it all embarrasses her for a moment or two, during which time he marks all her variations of colour, and gathers what he

believes to be valuable information from them.

"I've come in spite of your prohibition, you see, and I'm rewarded by your being the least bit in the world glad to see me ; and now tell me, Olive, what made you write in that way yesterday ?"

Deep in her heart, unacknowledged even to herself, there lives a hope that in someway or other, Madge will find out that Philip does not love her, and will break off the engagement, and leave Philip honourably free to return to her (Olive). It is there, and every now and then it wells up and makes itself felt, though Olive has been trying her hardest of late to kill it. It wells up and makes itself felt now, and Olive could not marry Griffiths Poynter ; no, not even if he were three times the dear, good fellow he is, not even to escape from the desolation

220      “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.

which so overcame her previous to his coming in.

“I wrote yesterday as I should write to-day, or to-morrow, or every day,” she answers, “I’m not a bit worth your liking in that way ; what a pity that you should do it.”

“The old love stands in my way,” he says, sorrowfully. “Oh, Olive ! if you would but believe that the memory of a first love won’t last, can’t last all your life ; if you would but let me be the one to try and efface it,” he pleads, very humbly.

Olive shakes her head. “It’s not that, I’m not cherishing any folly of that sort,” she says, feeling guiltily the whole time that she is doing the very thing she repudiates, “only my heart went sound asleep after that early mistake, and I’m sure that no one will ever have the power to wake it again ; but we can

be friends, though we can be nothing more ;  
can't we ? ”

It is his turn to shake his head now.

“ I can't be anything but friendly towards  
you, if you mean that,” he says, “ but as for  
seeing you often ; no.”

“ No, that would be folly on second  
thoughts,” she says, quite calmly. And then  
her desire to gain some information respect-  
ing Philip overmasters her, and she says,—

“ When are you going home ? ”

“ I may as well go at once, if your not  
going to have anything to say to me.”

“ And when shall you see Madge ? ” she goes  
on, not noticing the latter part of his speech.

“ Very soon ; I shall go and tell Madge my  
troubles.”

“ You were very fond of Madge ? ” she says,  
in a sharp questioning way, and he replies,—

“ Fond of her ? God bless her, I loved



222    “ ‘ HE COMETH 'NOT,' SHE SAID.”

her dearly, and thought for years that some day or other I should ask her to be my wife ; but I never did, you know, luckily.”

“ Why luckily ? ”

“ She would only have had the pain of refusing me, and now there's nothing of that sort between us. Do you know that poem of Peacock's, ‘ Love and Age ? ’ I often think that when I am old I shall feel exactly towards Madge Roden, as he did towards the one he addresses in that poem.”

“ She won't be Madge Roden then, she'll be Madge Fletcher,” Olive says, sententiously, “ and I don't remember enough of the poem to see the application in it to your case.”

“ These are the verses I had in my mind,” he says, and then he quotes :—

“ And I lived on to wed another,  
No cause she gave me to repine ;  
And when I heard you were a mother,  
I did not wish the children mine.

" My own young flock in fair procession,  
Made up a pleasant Christmas row.  
My joy in them was past expression,  
But that was thirty years ago."

Olive gives an unfeigned shudder, as he brings his quotation to an end.

"Gracious!" she says, "fancy living thirty years in this dull world without the society of the one we love—if we love anyone at all," she hastily adds; "what's the other verse? equally drearily resigned?"

"Now there was no attempt at anything like resignation in the first verse; how you pervert his meaning; he plainly avows that he has found full compensation; the other is the last verse of the poem, and the finest of the lot, I think."

"But tho' first love's impassion'd blindness  
Has passed away in colder light,  
I still have thought of you with kindness,  
And shall do till one last good-night."

Olive puts out her hands to avert the

stream of poetry. She is not sympathetic with the tenderly friendly feeling that fills Grif's heart for Madge.

“That's how you'll feel for Madge ‘to the end’ is it?” she says; “no one will feel that for me.”

“Olive, my love! give me the right to feel that—and more; give me the best right, a husband's right.”

“I told you ‘No,’” Olive says, softly, “and I meant it; it's no use going over the ground again and again. I shall live and die alone.”

And this is all the satisfaction Griffiths has in return for making his aunt bilious, and braving his cousins' displeasure.

## CHAPTER XI.

“AND HOW’S BRUNETTE?”

PHILIP, footsore, hungry, travel-stained, and surprised, is in one of his most uncompromising moods. It annoys him that any explanation should be necessary to account for his unexpected appearance. Not that “these people,” as he instantly dubs the Westcotts in his mind, seem to expect any explanation. But he feels that one is due to them, since he has burst in upon them in this way, and will be very glad of the shelter of their roof for the night.

Finding Phil here too, apparently quite at home on Exmoor—on what he has come to

regard as his own exclusive preserves, annoys him. “ What’s he larking about here for ? ” he asks himself, suspiciously. And the suspicion makes itself manifest in his manner to his cousin, in a way the Westcotts feel inclined to resent on the spot.

“ What on earth brings you here ? ” Philip asks in an insolent way of Phil, the instant the relationship between them is made clear. And the handsomest Miss Westcott, whose plunging waltz has been interrupted, retorts before Phil can rejoin,—

“ He has more cause to ask that question in that tone of you, I think.”

Good-natured Mrs. Westcott quietly standing by, marks that there is not a perfectly fair understanding between these two cousins thus strangely met under her roof, and hastens to interpose.

“ The tale of the disaster will be told

more easily, Mr. Fletcher, when you have changed these wet clothes and had some supper. Phil" (he is "Phil" to the whole family), "will you see to your cousin's comfort?"

"Certainly; we've rigged one another out many a time before to-day, haven't we, old fellow," Phil answers, good-temperedly, as he conducts his cousin from the room. But they all see plainly that there is no responsive good temper in that cousin's face.

"He's a surly, ill-tempered fellow for all his good looks," one of the girls says. "I suppose he's the one who is going to be married to pretty Miss Roden?"

"And on the strength of that grand marriage he's inclined to lord it over our Phil," the other girl rejoins. And they both resolve to make more of Phil than ever,

222 " 'HE COMETH NOT,' SHE SAID."

firmly believing that in their favours is to be found the true mandragora which can drug all disagreeables to rest.

Hanshaw or other, though Phil has nothing to do with his Madge, or his Madge's horse, Philip has a decided repugnance to mentioning Brunette. And yet he knows that it will be better for him to tell out the truth at once, for it will surely be dragged from him in the course of conversation. Why, indeed, should he hesitate about it? Nevertheless he does hesitate; and it is not until after he is arrayed in one of Phil's suits, and is ready to descend to the region from whence savoury odours of *salmis* and broils of game are rising up, that he says, with laborious carelessness,—

"By the way, the horse that came to grief to-day, was Madge's mare Brunette; awful bore altogether."

Phil knows that he has not the slightest right in the world to let his blood rush from his heart to his head, and then go back again with a flop, as it appears to do, when he hears this. He knows that he has no business to let indignation vex him in the way it does at this unconcerned mention of a loss that will be a severe one to Madge, and that will be mourned by her as a bitter grief. He knows all this, and so he chokes back the words that are rising—the words of condemnation and rebuke. This is all he can do.

"Poor Miss Roden," he says ; "she'll be very much cut up, I fear."

"There'll be a fuss about it, most likely," Philip says, drawing himself to his fine full height, as he enters the drawing-room, and a pleasant feeling steals over him to the effect that the whole family must see how very much he is like "Phil," of whom they seem



so fond, and how very much better looking he is.

Supper is spread in the library for him, "in order that he may not feel cut off from social intercourse, as he would if they banished him to the dining-room," Mrs. Westcott tells. For the library opens out of the drawing-room, and as his host sits down and takes a glass of sherry with Philip, the young men of the party go in at intervals and are introduced to him while he takes his supper leisurely.

He has ascertained how far Halsworthy is from Delabourn, and how far the Manor House, where Madge has gone through her illness, is, and he is at rest in his mind. When he has daintily satisfied his hunger, he goes back to the drawing-room, and addresses Phil.

"I find I'm nearer Halsworthy than the Manor House. I shall go over and have a

look at the place, to-morrow ; will you come with me, Phil ?”

“A look at what place ?” Phil asks, aggravatingly enough, it must be confessed, for he perfectly well knows to what place his cousin refers.

“Why, my—Moorbridge House,” Philip answers ; and young Ronald Westcott flirting violently with one of his cousins in the corner, assures that young person that he “can hardly stand the amount of side that fellow puts on.”

“Oh, yes, I’ll go—with pleasure,” Phil says, hesitatingly. Then feeling really anxious that nothing should be done to make Madge anxious or uneasy, he gets himself closer to his cousin, and says in a low voice,—

“You’ll let Miss Roden know as soon as possible that you’re all safe, of course ?”

"Shall I make you my messenger of good tidings, old boy?" Philip laughs, mockingly. "My dear fellow, the longer I keep the fate of that blessed mare of hers from her, the better for her health ; she will not kill herself with anxiety about me."

He speaks this last sentence in a very low tone of voice, and Phil has no answer for him. Each word that Philip utters, each look that Philip gives when speaking of her, convinces Phil more and more that poor Madge has not done well.


In pursuance of their plan of making much of Phil, and of proving to Philip that "they don't think so much of him, though he is going to marry Miss Roden," the Miss Westcotts volunteer to drive the two young men over to Halsworthy in their own low, four-wheeled dog-cart, the next morning. The handsomest (she is also the eldest) Miss

Westcott drives, and asks Phil to sit in front with her. And the one who is pushed behind with Philip, leans over the rail and directs her conversation chiefly to Ronald’s tutor. Altogether Philip is taught by these injudicious young ladies to feel himself of no account, and Philip does not like it.

He regains his proper position in a measure when he comes to Moorbridge House, for the servants are wise in their generation, and know well who will rule and always give the law, when Miss Madge marries him. So they serve him with sycophantish zeal; and the housekeeper comes forward with eager, earnest offers of luncheon. And Philip sees with satisfaction that “even those colts,” as he calls the Westcotts, are a little impressed with the perfect order and “good style” of everything in this house, which is to be his.

The idea of its being his, and of his own importance when it shall be his, has grown upon him considerably of late. He has altered a good deal from the careless scapegrace he was when we knew him first. He has grown more selfish during this time of his prospective prosperity, and—woe for Madge—his temper is not as good as it used to be. The latent arrogance is cropping up visibly; in fact, the same arrogance that ejected him from many a good situation in those former days of need and poverty, when he did not dare to display it to the same extent that he does now.

He is a handsome, accomplished fellow, this Philip, and now that he is king of his own castle, as it were, he shows to great advantage in the eyes of the Miss Westcotts. He plays and sings well; and though, after the manner of colts, they laugh at first at the



idea "of a man sitting down to play the piano," they are carried by his powerful baritone at once, and wish that their friend Phil had the same gift.

After the manner of colts, too, as soon as they are pleased with him they frisk about him, flattering him most candidly, and unintentionally causing him to feel himself a conquering hero in very truth. They are void of all design, these pure-hearted hoydens ; so, when they dance about him, begging him to sing "one more song, only one wee bit of a song, because they never heard anything so lovely in their lives as his voice," they don't mean a bit more than they say. But Philip is not of the order to accredit girls with meaning less.

Only Ronald, who has ridden over by the side of the dog-cart, is undazzled. He girds more than ever against the "amount of side

that fellow puts on," and wishes with all his heart that pretty Miss Roden and Moorbridge House were going to fall to the lot of his friend Phil.

From the opposite wall to the piano, as Philip plays and sings, a bright girlish face, full of hope and happiness, and radiant with beauty, looks down upon the group, and seems to smile merry approval of their proceedings. And Phil looks up at the pictured Madge, and recalls every incident of that one wretchedly happy ride he had with her, and hates himself for loving her—his cousin's promised bride—more than ever.

He is not so exclusively the object of the Miss Westcott's devotion on the homeward journey. Philip comes in for such a fair share of attention that he is quite contented to stay one more night at Delabourn. And when the next morning he starts for the

Manor House, the girls speed the parting guest by accompanying him to the door-steps, from whence they watch him ride away, and shout farewells to him.

"Shall I give any message from you to Madge?" Philip asks, suddenly, of his cousin, who accompanies the happy lover a short distance.

"Remember me most kindly to her, and tell her how glad I am she's better."

"Won't that sound rather cruel?" Philip says, laughing, "you having been her cavalier on the memorable occasion, might surely say a little more about it."

"Would you like me to send word to her that I was a fool not to have remembered the landmarks better, and that I have been feeling myself a fool ever since," Phil asks in an annoyed tone.

"Well, I think it would be more flatter-





238    " ' HE COMETH NOT,' SHE SAID."

ing to her than the common place, ' Glad to hear she's better,' " Philip answers, carelessly.

" Say what you like—she won't misunderstand me," Phil says, recovering his good-temper, and then Philip begins to grumble.

" I hope she won't insist on heading a crusade against the crows for the recovery of the carcass of Brunette ; I expect to be made to repent having touched the mare ; Madgo is capable of having a relapse and going straight off into another brain fever when she hears of it."

" She's incapable of doing anything to hurt you ; as she lent you the mare, she'll do nothing to make you repent having ridden her," Phil says, reassuringly.

" Ah ! but the worst of it is I had taken the mare before she offered it to me ; and when I mentioned that trifling fact, I don't

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think she liked it ; it’s always incomprehensible to me where women draw the line ; so far and no farther you may go with safety—after that a sudden destruction comes upon you unawares, and a criminal is a fool to what you feel.”

To all this Phil answers not a word. He has been listening eagerly, hoping that one word of regret for the fate of the mare, because she was dear to Madge, will fall from Philip’s lips. But no such word is uttered. His sorrow for Brunette is as selfish as is every other joy and sorrow of his.

There is something that strongly resembles anger between these two young men, when they part presently, though they call each other “old fellow,” and each adds, “let’s hear of you soon.” Philip’s last words are,—

“If I were you, I’d find out how old Westcott will cut up ; the family’s good, and

the girls are passable, and you might have either of them.”

To this, Phil vouchsafes no answer, for he is thinking that it was in this spirit probably, that Philip asked for Madge’s hand and heart.

It is late that night before Philip Fletcher reaches the Manor House, and instantly, on entering the yard even, he is met by an anxious group. Madge is distraught with anxiety and suspense, he is told. And then simultaneously a questioning cry arises, as they detect that he is not on Brunette.

He answers them almost roughly, for he is sorely perplexed and annoyed. “If you’ll only give a fellow, who has been nearly smashed to pieces, time to draw breath, you shall know what has happened,” he says; “the long and the short of it is that the mare lost her temper and killed herself, and

nearly killed me ; but one explanation will suffice, I think, and I'd better give that to Madge."

"Go upstairs speaking cheerfully," Mrs. Henderson suggests; "Madge is weak enough to declare that she won't go to bed until she has seen you," and then Mrs. Henderson pities him, as she would anyone who was unlucky enough to be the innocent cause of giving intense pain to Madge.

"My dear boy," she says, "you have the satisfaction of knowing that Madge will feel that if anything could have spared her pet, you would have done that thing."

And Philip winces under a conscience prick, as he vividly remembers the way he lashed and spurred poor Brunette into that last fatal burst.

Her face is as pink as the border of her dressing-gown as he goes into the room, and

242    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

she comes forward to meet him with an excited gladness gleaming in her eyes, that makes him tremble for what he has to tell.

“Lost your way, dear, I suppose,” she cries out in her ringing tones, “like *I* did with your cousin ; thank Heaven it hasn’t ended in the same way ; you’re safe back, dear Philip ; and how’s Brunette ?”

## CHAPTER XII.

“WHY, PHILIP, YOU LOVE HER!”

“AND how's Brunette?”

If she had “only given him breathing time,” he tells himself hastily, he would have told out the tale of Brunette's death so truly, tenderly, and well. But as it is the demand for information strikes him dumb for a moment or two; and when he does speak he can't screw his courage to the striking point; he can't stab the girl who is hanging on his answer, whose very eyes are questioning concerning the well-being of her horse; he can't tell her the truth.

“Brunette? oh! she's all right; but,

Madge, you seem more anxious about the mare than about me. I've news for you, dear," he adds, with a reckless resolve to turn the conversation at any cost to himself or Madge; "whom do you think I've seen?"

Madge declines to guess. She dislikes being rebuked for her loving anxiety about the mare that was hers before she was Philip's. But she does not decline in an aggrieved or aggravating way.

"Tell me, Philip. I am not a good hand at speculation."

There is not a grain of sulkiness in Madge Roden's whole nature; but in very truth now her heart is too full for her to go into the folly of guessing about anything. The girl has been pondering about the possible whereabouts of these two absentees for hours; and now one of them has reproved her because

she has questioned him concerning his fellow-traveller, about whom he ought to have been interested for her sake.

So the notes in which she says "Tell me, Philip, I am not a good hand at speculation," fall flatly on his ears, and hurt that sensitive self-love, and impart just that degree of coolness to his manner which may be felt but not defined. It falls on the girl who has been so very ill like a biting blast from the north. She dreads the continuance of it so fearfully that she does violence to the truthfulness of her nature, and affects to fall into that humour of his (that humour, alas! which is past), of guessing whom it is he has met with.

"I feel sure it's Grif," she says; "dear old Grif; why hasn't he been to see me?"

She can't feel a genuine enthusiasm about this friend of her youth; but she gets up



such a successful imitation of it, that Philip feels at once that he is provided with a real grievance.

"It was not ‘Grif,’" he says, and his words fall off his lips with the distinct rattle of shingle ; "it was not Grif, if Grif was the person who behaved so very—very obtrusively that day at Winstaple."

"I called him ‘Grif’ before I could speak plainly," she says, with a mighty effort at calmness, an effort that enables her to swallow the mountain of indignation that has rapidly developed from the choking ball, to which we are all well accustomed.

She is leaning back in her chair as she says this, looking so fair and fragile, that he is almost constrained to proclaim himself incapable of appreciating her on the spot,—almost inclined to proclaim himself unworthy, and then to vanish for ever from these fetter-

ing influences, and hold himself a free man once more. Free to seek Olive Aveland!

Almost, but not quite. In such matters as these Philip is a coward at heart. So he prevaricates and persuades according to his wont; and as soon as expediency has forced him back into the shallow semblance of good humour, he says, adroitly,—

“I suppose it’s the fact of my over-estimating him so very highly that made me impatient of your guessing the name of any lesser man; just imagine my meeting with Phil on the moor, he’s——”

“——Your cousin,” she interrupts, sharply.

And then all her weariness, all her doubts, all her fears, and all her love, conspire together, rise up and over-master her.

“Oh! why has he come?” she says.

“Apparently he entertained the notion that he was at liberty to come without

rendering up his reasons to me," Philip answers. "Why shouldn't he be here as well as anywhere else? What is he to you, that you should question ——"

He checks himself as he utters this word, for even in his anger he feels he has gone too far. But he has an uneasy feeling that Mrs. Henderson and old Miss Roden are lying in wait to reprove him for showing want of consideration for Madge, and he is altogether thrown out of gear.

"What, indeed?" Madge suffers herself to sigh; then the absurdity of it strikes her, the absurdity and the injustice of it. Why should she sigh? why should she lachrymosely ask, "What, indeed?" Why shouldn't she take the intelligence of Phil's near vicinity cheerfully and unconcernedly?

"He's your cousin, you know, Philip, like your brother almost," she says, in her natural

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blithe tones. And then she holds her hands out to him, and puts her face up towards him, and he knows that he is dismissed for the time, and that she is yearning for the love and sympathy she will find when he is gone, in the companionship of her aunt and friend.

It comes upon him strongly just now that not so would Olive have dismissed him under such circumstances. All Madge's sweet patience, all Madge's innocent charms, all Madge's delicate consideration for himself, are as nothing to him as he contrasts her with that other one, upon whom he had trampled with impunity so frequently.

But the time is not ripe yet for the final overthrow of this castle of ambition which he has built of cards. Just a little longer he will feign, though he fumes most tryingly against the necessity of doing it.

“I didn't come to an end of my explana-

tion," he begins ; " either I grew misty, or you grew impatient, which was it, Madge ? Phil's down here tutoring with a young fellow called Ronald Westcott ; they're staying at Westcott's uncle's place, Delabourn, and he's awfully gone on one of the girls."

Madge listens to all this gravely, decorously ; but for all this outward, grave decorum, she is sorely disturbed within. She does not believe that Phil is awfully gone on any girl but herself, and she feels a traitor to Philip for believing that his cousin is thus falsely true to her still. Underlying this sentiment there is a feeling that Phil is unkind and ungenerous in coming back, and involuntarily she prays that she may not be led into temptation.

" I shall be well enough to go home in a few days," she says, making an effort to detach her thoughts from the dangerous

subject ; “how glad I shall be, though I have had such kindness here ; but home is home. I shall rest and enjoy it more than ever.”

“I should think so,” Philip grumbles. Then he can’t resist the desire he has to blame somebody else, since he feels so miserably to blame himself, and he adds, “I know that I shall feel considerably relieved when I get you out of this den, to which my cousin’s confounded imprudence consigned you.”

And then they say good-night once more and part ; Madge calling to him, as he reaches the door, to “be sure to order Brunette round in front of her window early to-morrow morning.”

The ladies are all assembled in a little upstairs sitting-room, and they call him in as he is passing along the corridor. Mrs.

Graves, eager, brisk, and bright-eyed, is the one to address him first.

"Well! she took it more quietly than I expected; much more quietly than I should have taken the news of a favourite horse of mine being done for."

"There was no need to go into that little matter to-night," he says as carelessly as he can; but his eyes rove from Mrs. Graves to Mrs. Henderson's face, and it stings him to read marked disapproval there.

"It would have been wrong to disturb her to-night, wouldn't it?" he pleads against his will.

"The less Madge is deceived the better for her happiness and yours," she answers, coldly, for she has been very fond of Philip, and though that fondness is decreasing rapidly, she cannot bear that he should show himself in his true mean colours before strangers.

The reproof annoys him, partly because he knows that he deserves it, and partly because the friendship of the reprover stood him in good stead in former days, and he shrinks from casting it behind him now. But he reminds himself that very soon he will be master of Madge and her actions, and of Moorbridge House.

It is absurd to start by being in awe of one of Madge's friends, even though she is the best and dearest of them all. Aye! even though she has the mighty claim on him of having been kind to Olive.

"Even if it were a more important matter than it is, it rests entirely between Madge and myself; understand that, if you please, entirely."

There is an unmistakable frown on Philip's fair handsome face as he says this, and a corresponding one darkens Mrs. Henderson's



instantly. Tender, and gentle-hearted, and mannered as she is, she has a high spirit that no assumption on Philip's part can . daunt.

“ You can hardly expect me to tell her lies if she asks about her mare. I should dread some awful punishment overtaking me if I deceived the most truthful, unsuspicious nature in this world.”

She passes from the room and takes her way to Madge's ; but before she reaches the door Philip, with all the winning grace that fits him like a glove, and that he can assume at any moment, is by her side.

“ My punishment has commenced already,” he whispers ; “ I'm growing half-hearted about many things, I'm losing your friendship, and I've lost Madge's love.”

“ Mrs. Henderson is gentle-hearted, as has been said, and now, as he speaks what she

knows to be wholly true, she is full of pity for him.

"Poor fellow!" she whispers; "it's a tangled yarn, I fear; but honest, straightforward endeavours to unravel it might bring happiness to us all again."

"What do you mean?" he asks, suspiciously.

"O, Philip! you say you 'have lost her love;' has not she lost yours, if, indeed, she ever had it? Don't let the thought of position and fortune drag you to perdition and Madge to misery."

"Are you advising me to break the engagement?" he asks, angrily.

"God knows I'm not capable of advising any longer; I implore!"

"Thanks; that my cousin, the rightful man, may reign in my stead?" he responds, savagely. "No, Mrs. Henderson, Madge shall

256    “‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

pay a penalty for her fickleness as well as myself. You both knew the worst of me when I proposed to Madge ; what have I done since to forfeit the good opinion you then held of me, in spite of many things ? We must both make the best of it.”

With this he goes away, and Mrs. Henderson’s heart grows heavy as she feels that she is compelled to relinquish her last hope.

“He can’t be stung into breaking it off,” she sighs ; “all his nice feeling is pretence ; he is selfish to the core of his heart.”

“Who was that whispering to you in the corridor ?” Madge asks. “I hate people to whisper, it always sets me wondering, and then I hate myself for that, because it’s small curiosity. Who was it ?”

“Philip.”

“O, Philip ! and why didn’t you both speak out ? Did you think I was asleep, or

didn't you want me to hear what you were talking about?"

"Madge, dear, the confinement of the sick-room is telling upon you, indeed," Mrs. Henderson says, with a very transparent attempt at gaiety.

"Was Philip telling you about his cousin?"

"About his cousin? no, dear."

"His cousin is down near to us," Madge goes on, rapidly, "at least he's at Delabourn with some people called Westcott, and—and I don't think Philip likes his being there."

"He said nothing to me about it," Mrs. Henderson says, briefly. Phil is a subject on which she will not be tempted to talk: "Madge, dear, go to bed now, to-morrow you are to go down stairs; the next day, possibly, you may go home."

The prospect of a change after the long dreary confinement to her room, thrills

Madge with pleasure. She is still young enough to be liable to these abrupt changes of feelings, still young enough to cast out sorrow at the most distant approach of joy.

"It will be great fun going down into that funny old room again," she says; "I'll ask Mrs. Graves to have her china washed, and Philip and I will re-arrange it; and Brunette shall be brought round to the window ——"

Her eyes beaming with this small excitement, are fixed on Mrs. Henderson's face, and a wave of colour, a flicker of emotion suddenly passes over that face, and makes the girl exclaim,—

"What is the matter? What have I said?"

"Nothing, nothing, Madge," Mrs. Henderson says, in that hasty tone of wishing to drop the subject, which invariably makes one question more deeply and eagerly.

"But I must have said something," Madge persists; "what could have made you look red and put out; was it about the china? or (with a quick qualm) was it about Brunette?"

For a full moment Mrs. Henderson hesitates, hopes to think of something to say that may avert the necessity of her dealing this blow which will hurt both Madge and Philip in different ways. Now that it has come to this point she feels her position of witness, and testifier against Philip's candour most bitterly. Oh! dear, dear! Her own love-troubles had scarcely ceased to occupy a prominent position in her mind, before she was distracted by the love-troubles of others. All these thoughts dart through her mind in that moment of time, and then Madge says again, very impatiently this time,—

"Well, well! what was it about?"

"Oh, Madge!" Mrs. Henderson says, fairly

260    “ ‘ HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

cornered now, “you have much to be humbly grateful and thankful for, dear. Philip is safe, but he met with an awful accident, and Brunette is ——”

“Not ‘all right,’ as Philip told me she was,” Madge interrupts, with her eyes kindling, and her mouth quivering.

There is a long awkward pause after this. Madge leans back with her face buried in her hands, not crying but thinking, with horrible intensity. “This can’t go on always,” she reflects, “this system of deception would quickly drive me mad with conjecture?” With a dry sob and a gulp she rouses herself, and puts her two hands out to Mrs. Henderson, who answers the appeal by telling all she knows of the end of Brunette.

Madge listens to the recital without saying a word. She makes no show of that aching at her heart, which is, after all, not so much

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on account of the death of the horse, as it is on account of the disposition of the man who is to be her husband. The way in which he has treated it; and her in connection with it, seems to be symptomatic of something from which Madge recoils. He has not been faithful and true about a thing which he may consider small. How will it be about greater matters ?

"Philip wished to keep it from you to-night, he was so anxious you should have undisturbed rest," Mrs. Henderson says, making the best of it, and Madge answers piteously,—

"We won't talk about it, please ; to-morrow the light will make it all clear, but to-night I feel in a mist."

There is not a shadow of reproach on Madge's face when he comes to her the next morning. She is down stairs by this time,



dusting and toying with, and arranging Mrs. Graves's quaint old china figures, and vases, and bowls, and tazzas. She has schooled herself well in the night. She has tried to put herself in Philip's place, and has resolved to save him from feeling hurt at the cost of any amount of trouble to herself. He is touched into tenderness and something like truth, by her demeanour. And the kiss he gives her in return for the sympathetic way her hand nestles into his when the interest of the story of Brunette culminates, has more of a lover's warmth in it, than any previous one has had. And so the glow of the semblance at least of the sun of happiness is over these young people for awhile.

Presently Madge begins searching in her pocket. “ I have a letter here to show you. What can I have done with it ? O, Philip ! I'm so shocked, and so will you be, I know.

No! this isn't it; I did think she'd have confided in me. Oh! here it is, look, from Olive Aveland.” And she hands him a letter from the girl for whom his heart is sick, without a single suspicion in her mind.

Tingling all through his veins (for his blood is less false than his actions) Philip takes the letter, and tries to read what Olive has to say to Madge.

The characters dance before his eyes, and Madge's words, “Oh, Philip! I'm so shocked, and so will you be, I know,” keep on ringing in his ears. Can Olive be married, or be going to marry? He can't control himself, though he knows that he is calling Madge's keenest attention on himself. He holds the letter with a shaking hand before eyes that see nothing, and lets his head drop lower and lower on his breast.

This continues for a period of time that

264    “ ‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID.”

can hardly be computed. To Madge, upon whom so many things dawn while it lasts, it seems long. But an echo would not have had time to die away upon the ear before Madge breaks the silence.

Breaks the silence with words, that, in the midst of his anguish at the loss that will surely ensue of so much that he keenly appreciates, give him a certain relief.

“Why, Philip, you love her,” Madge says, “and you would have married *me* !”

END OF VOL. II.

